

Eomyia

THE WILD RUTHVENS.



Nancie was seated on her favourite little stool, beside Dick's couch. (Page 95.)

THE WILD RUTHVENS.

A Home Story.

BY

CURTIS YORKE,

*Author of "Hush!" "Dudley," "The Brown Portmanteau,"
"That Little Girl," &c.*

"Thou would'st be Hero? Wait not then supinely
For fields of fine romance which no day brings;
The finest life lies oft in doing finely
A multitude of unromantic things.
The heroism of thy true endeavour
Shall gild the commonplace of common days,
And God Himself shall guard thy work for ever,
And crown it with eternity of praise."

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THE WILD RUTHVENS.

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CHAPTER I.

WHICH INTRODUCES THE FAMILY.

"A boy is the most difficult to manage of all wild beasts."
Plato.

THE wild Ruthvens! So the county called them; and in truth the name suited them; for a wilder, more graceless lot of young people surely never were collected under one roof before nor since. They were orphans, for their father had died four years ago, just before Baby May was born, and their mother had only survived him a few weeks. The household was ruled nominally by an elder sister of the late Major Ruthven's, but the Ruthvens themselves were ruled by no man or woman living. They had a faint respect, perhaps, for the commands of Uncle John, their mother's brother, on the comparatively few occasions when he visited Ruthven Court; but his

hungry loving little soul that, as yet, had never been satisfied. Her one comfort was Baby May, whom she adored, and by whom she was adored in return.

"Don't want *any* more boys," echoed Baby May, shaking her fair curly head. "Only want Roy, and Ted, and Joe."

"Cousin Dick isn't a boy," said a plump little girl of ten, who was nursing Oliver Twist (a much-enduring black and white kitten) in a corner of the shabby but comfortable sofa. "He's quite grown-up, because I asked Aunt Prue."

Here two boys, who had been having a half-laughing, but determined tussle in a distant corner for possession of a stuffed parrot (which now remained in the victor's hand, minus its head and tail) took simultaneous flying leaps over the table, and precipitated themselves bodily upon Joe, who had emerged from his retreat, and now lay calmly on his back, with his arms folded under his head.

"Who is quite grown up?" asked Roy, the eldest and successful competitor for the parrot. He was a fine dark-eyed, dark-haired boy of about fifteen, as like his sister Kitty as he could well be, except that he was not nearly so handsome.

"Cousin Dick," said Agatha, laying down her thimble with an air of relief. "He's coming to board with us."

"To board with us?" repeated Joe, half-raising him-

self from his recumbent position. "What's that? We're more likely to be bored with him, I should say!" (Joe had a small reputation for wit in the family, and strained it to the utmost.)

"Well, you know," said Agatha doubtfully, "I fancy it means that as we are not very well off, and as he *is* well off, and is ill, and all alone at that great house of his in Lancashire—"

"It means," put in Kitty, with an air of decision, as Agatha paused, "that he is going to pay us handsomely for living here, and that we shall be better off than ever we were before. And I'm sure," emphatically, "*that'll* be a good thing. Aunt Prue told us to-day, while you boys were doing your lessons with Mr. Lester. She had a letter from Uncle John, and he's coming either to-night or to-morrow to talk it over."

"Well, I'm sure I hope you boys will behave better than you generally do," observed Agatha, "or he'll think he's been sent to a lunatic asylum—cousin Dick I mean."

"We'll just behave as we always do," said Roy doggedly, as he leaned his broad young shoulders against the mantelpiece, "and if he doesn't like it—why, he can do the other thing."

"It's a beastly shame of Uncle John," put in Ted, who was a year younger than Roy, and delightfully ugly, with an honest manly kind of ugliness which in its way

was almost as attractive as beauty—"a *beastly* shame. Sending the fellow to stick himself down here, making a nuisance of himself, and very likely bossing the whole show. A fellow we've never seen before either—though he *is* our cousin."

"I don't think he'll do much 'bossing,' poor fellow," said Kitty, very soberly, "because he is quite an invalid, Aunt Prue says, and has to lie on the sofa all day."

"Lie on the sofa all day! He must be a jolly muff," chimed in Joe, who in all his thirteen years had hardly ever had a day's illness, though his pale sharp features and great shining eyes invested his appearance with an interesting delicacy.

"He's a *cripple*!" said the little girl upon the sofa. Her real name was Ida, but she had long ago been christened "Blinks" by her brothers, because of a habit she had of winking her eyes very fast when she spoke.

"A *cripple*?" echoed the boys in various accents of disgust. "Oh, I say!"

"Yes," went on Blinks with relish, "and Auntie says he has to be carried about from one room to another, and—"

"Be quiet, Blinks," said Agatha.

"A *cripple*!" said Joe again. "Has he no legs—or what?"

"No legs—poor boy!" said Baby May, shaking her head compassionately, and surveying her own sturdy little limbs with calm satisfaction.

"Oh yes, he has legs, of *course*," said Kitty hastily; "but he really is quite helpless. You know he was thrown from his horse six months ago, and injured his spine so dreadfully that the doctors say he can never recover."

"I'd rather have been killed outright," muttered Roy.

"So should I," assented Ted. "And I say," he added, "who's going to carry him about from one room to another, if he can't walk? *Us*, I suppose."

"Oh no, he will bring his own servant," said Agatha.

"And I'm going to take him his breakfast in the mornings," observed Blinks in an important voice. "I asked Aunt Prue if I might, and she said yes—" But here Blinks broke off with a piercing yell, for Joe, undulating stealthily towards her in the twilight, gave such a severe tweak to poor Oliver Twist's tail, that that justly-exasperated animal not only scratched Blinks severely, but in the most vicious manner jumped down and scratched Baby May as well.

Whereupon Blinks fell upon Joe literally "tooth and nail," while Nancie, furious at the great red scratch upon her darling Baby May's arm, flew to revenge her by banging the unrepentant Joe upon the shoulders with the hearthbrush.

"I say, Nancie, stop that, will you!" shouted Joe fiercely, feeling, doubtless, that "two to one" was not fair."

But in another moment Nancie was caught up by

Roy and Ted, and deposited, screaming and struggling, in the middle of the large table, to be pushed to and fro from one to the other upon its leather-covered surface, until she burst into passionate shrieks and sobs.

Kitty (who, as Agatha often said, *would* countenance the boys in all their mad pranks, and indeed at times was as bad as any of them) cried out between bursts of half unwilling laughter,

“Boys—boys—it is really too bad!”

But in the twinkling of an eye, she found herself perched on the top of a moderately high bookcase (frequently in use for penances of this sort) where, laughing and expostulating, she perforce had to remain until assistance should arrive.

Meanwhile Nancie, who had rushed from the room and got half-way upstairs, was captured and brought back to endure the further indignity of being held prisoner by Ted, while Roy decorated her face with tasteful little blobs of ink, and tied her long hair into a series of tight hard knots.

“Now boys,” said Agatha, her pretty face quite distressed, “I will not have this. I forbid you to tease Nancie so.”

“Oh, Spitfire can stand up for herself, Madam Agatha, so don’t you interfere,” said Roy, making a sudden grab at the skirt of the speaker’s dress with one hand, while he held Nancie’s wrists with the other.

Agatha sprang aside; but alas! the unhappy serge gown, which had not been mended with a view to sustaining such attacks, gave way suddenly, and a goodly part of the flounce "came away" in Roy's hand. This, and the unholy joy of the offender, was too much for Agatha, who as a rule was the sweetest-tempered of them all. Her small pale face crimsoned suddenly, and with flashing eyes she administered to the offender a sound and wholesome box on the ear. He stepped back hurriedly, tramped upon poor little Baby May's fingers, tripped over her small body, and nearly fell into the fire-place.

The next moment he flew at the somewhat conscience-stricken Agatha, and shook her so violently that her very teeth seemed to rattle in her head.

Nancie, driven to frenzy by Baby May's piteous cries, bit Ted's hand so viciously that with an indignant howl he let her go.

At this moment the door opened, and Miss Ruthven, otherwise "Aunt Prue" entered the room. Dear, gentle, loving Aunt Prue! with her soft brown hair streaked with grey, her still youthful heart, and her beautiful blue eyes. They all adored her, these wild nephews and nieces of hers, and would, I believe, have laid down their lives for her any day; but as for obeying her—or recognising her authority in any way—why, they would simply have shouted at the idea.

She raised her hand imploringly as she stood in the doorway, and her lips were seen to move ; but not a sound could be heard in the appalling din around her. The derisive shouts of the two elder boys, who had again seized the unhappy Nancie ; the shrieks of Nancie and Blinks ; the plaintive wailing of Baby May, mingled with Kitty's vociferous demands to be taken down, and Agatha's vain entreaties for silence, would have drowned a voice possessing treble the power of Aunt Prue's.

But all at once there was a lull. Roy and Ted released the struggling and furious Nancie ; Joe and Blinks pushed their hair out of their eyes, and scrambled to their feet ; even Baby May stopped crying and ran towards the door, where just behind Aunt Prue, stood a stout, middle-sized old gentleman, with a handsome genial face, a fierce grey moustache, and kind grey eyes —Uncle John, in fact.

"Now, now, children," cried the new-comer, with a frown which was less awe-inspiring than it ought to have been. "What's all this? Bless my soul, Nancie, what's the matter with you?"

For Nancie was actually dancing, and almost choking with passion.

"I hate you, Roy and Ted!" shrieked the little fury, her great dark eyes literally blazing. "I hate you both! I'll be even with you for this—see if I don't. No, I won't be a good girl and hold my tongue, Uncle John!"

No, I won't remember I was sorry afterwards the last time, Aunt Prue! Leave me alone, Agatha—or I'll *kick* you! I hate you all! You're always insulting me, and laughing at me, and making my life miserable!"

"Go it, Nancie! Two to one on Spitfire!" shouted Joe, who was standing on his hands, waving his feet aloft in a particularly maddening way.

It was too much for poor Nancie. She caught up an ink-bottle, which by an evil chance lay ready to her hand, and hurled it with all her force at the unsuspecting Ted. It just missed him (which was well, as he turned himself right side up again), and crashed through one of the window-panes into the garden beyond. The next moment Nancie had rushed past Uncle John like a small whirlwind, and thence out of the room and upstairs, where a door was heard to bang violently.

There was a short silence, broken only by a giggle from Blinks. Then Uncle John spoke.

"Boys, I am ashamed of you!" he said sternly. "You are a set of unmanly young scoundrels to tease your little sister so. Leave the room, all of you, and prepare for tea. And if I hear any more of this bullying tom-foolery, I'll give you all as sound a thrashing as ever you had in your lives."

The boys left the room, and were subsequently heard giving way to subdued explosions of laughter, as they climbed swiftly upstairs upon all fours, which mode of

progression was as natural to them in ascending the staircase, as sliding down the bannisters was in descending it. They usually obeyed Uncle John (when he was there to enforce his orders), for one and all knew that his thrashings were something to be remembered. He was a passionate man when thoroughly roused, though usually good-natured to a degree, and the boys had vivid recollections of certain merciless beatings which had made their lives a burden to them for a considerable time after the administration thereof. However, as these punishments were usually mitigated, so to speak, by some timely, if injudicious "tip" varying from half-a-crown to five shillings, it is to be feared their effect was less lasting than could have been wished. As for the girls they tyrannized over Uncle John to an incredible extent, and I really think he liked it.

Baby May was now standing on a footstool at his side, and with calm audacity was searching his pocket for chocolate creams, of which sweetmeat she was inordinately fond. A box being forthcoming, she demolished half-a-dozen creams at one blow, and demanded to be carried into the dining-room, where presently all the family, with the exception of Nancie, assembled round the tea-table. Kitty, by the way, had been rescued from her airy perch some time ago.

As a slight tribute to Uncle John's presence, there was rather less squabbling and reckless hilarity at the table

than usual to-night. To be sure Roy playfully dropped a large caterpillar into Kitty's tea, and she in return dropped it down his neck, with the immediate result that the contents of both their tea-cups bedewed the table-cloth. As it was a clean table-cloth, this was trying to Aunt Prue's soul, and she sighed a silent protest. At this moment the door opened, and Nancie entered, and took her accustomed place between Kitty and Agatha. Her nose and eyes were swollen and very red, her mouth sullen. Altogether at that moment she was not at all a pleasant-looking little girl.

"Your nose is twite red, Nancie dear," observed Baby May, cheerfully from her post of observation near the tea-tray.

Nancy flushed a dingy crimson, and helped herself to bread and butter.

"My eye! what an object!" observed Ted, pausing in the act of helping himself to jam, to gaze at his sister open-mouthed. "She's more like a witch than ever!"

Nancie's lips trembled, and two large tears began to meander slowly down her cheeks.

"Cry, baby, cry—put your finger in your eye!" chanted Joe provokingly.

At this point Uncle John brought the remarks of these two facetious young men to an abrupt conclusion by rising and administering to each a ringing box on the ear. The delinquents relapsed into sullen silence, and the meal

proceeded. As it approached its conclusion Uncle John said, addressing them all collectively,

"Now boys and girls, I have to tell you that your cousin Dick Trevanion is coming to—er—to live here; and I do most earnestly trust that you will all try to behave yourselves, and that—that in short it may be—in fact, that it may be a mutual benefit and pleasure to—er—to all." Here Uncle John, who did not shine in oratory, took off his glasses, rubbed them diligently, and went on, directing a severe glance towards the boys, "And mind, if I hear of any tricks being played upon the poor fellow, who is as helpless as a baby, I'll—I'll break every bone in your bodies. As for you, girls, I hope you'll try to cheer the poor fellow up a bit, for his is a sad trial—a very sad trial. Six months ago he was as strong as one of your brothers, and as fine a young fellow as you would wish to see; and now he is a cripple for life, and—" The speaker stopped suddenly, and blew his nose with violence.

"No legs!" said Baby May, with funny solemnity.
"Poor boy! Baby May will kiss him."

Here Blinks choked in her tea, to the undisguised delight of her brothers, and shortly afterwards Uncle John found that he had only a quarter of an hour to walk to the station. He could not stay all night, he said, for he had to be in Manchester early in the morning.

Poor Uncle John! he was much exercised in his

mind sometimes regarding his wild nephews and nieces. He was a quiet, order-loving old bachelor, who lived, and ate, got up, and went to bed, by clockwork ; and to tell the truth, he was not sorry when he left Ruthven Court behind him.

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH THE BOYS BEHAVE BADLY.

“ Turning to mirth, all things on earth,
As only boyhood can.”

MR. LESTER, the young Ruthvens' tutor (employed and paid for by kind-hearted Uncle John), was a quiet-looking young man of good family and uncertain temper, who came three times a week to instruct these young savages, and whose labours among his unruly pupils were productive of anything but satisfactory results. They learned their lessons or they didn't, just as it happened to suit them ; got respectively thrashed and lectured by Uncle John at intervals, when Mr. Lester wrote a formal complaint to that gentleman ; took their punishment cheerfully, and went on as before. There was a first-class boys' school in the neighbourhood ; but from it the Ruthven boys had been summarily and conclusively expelled six months ago, the head-master refusing to take them back on any pretext whatever. Nancie and Blinks attended a select ladies' school about

half a mile from the Court. Agatha and Kitty had been, until a year ago, at a boarding-school in Brighton.

Mr. Lester used to wonder sometimes if boys existed anywhere else who were so lamentably ignorant. Stupid they certainly were not. Idle, mischievous, and exasperating to the last degree, they certainly *were*. Besides his labours with these boys, this unhappy young man had undertaken to superintend the preparation of the younger girls' lessons—I mean Nancie and Blinks. Half-an-hour was devoted to the little girls, while the boys wrote exercises (this being, as Mr. Lester had long ago discovered, the only time when they could be got to write them); the remaining hour and half was a wretched purgatory to the weary tutor and his boy pupils alike. I am sorry to say, that the young ladies' behaviour was, as a rule, quite on a par with their brothers'.

One day's proceedings will give a very fair example of how the pursuit of learning was followed in the Ruthven family. Nearly a week had passed since Uncle John's visit, and Dick Trevanion was to arrive on the following day. It was a dull afternoon as to weather, very wet, and bitterly cold. Mr. Lester was late; it was nearly half-past four when he came, instead of four. He was not in his most amiable mood this afternoon, having, for one thing, a severe headache. Unhappily, his pupils, boys and girls alike, seemed disposed to be especially impish and reckless.

For perhaps five minutes after Mr. Lester's arrival, the boys were (apparently) absorbed in their French and Latin exercises, while Nancie and Blinks waded through the geography of South America. Then the usual amenities were exchanged.

"I say, Lester, I can't write this thing," said Roy, leaning back in his chair with an extensive yawn. "I don't know what the French idioms for 'turning the cold shoulder,' and 'taking no notice of' are, and I don't want to, either."

"Go on with your work, sir," said Mr. Lester sharply. "And when you address me, I shall thank you to do so in a more respectful manner."

Roy waited until his tutor was again deep in South America, then stealthily slipping a piece of fresh paper over his exercise, he was soon absorbed in a series of thrilling though very badly-executed comic sketches, representing Mr. Lester in various attitudes of abject fear and humiliation, surrounded by singularly anatomized wild beasts, and entitled "The Adventures of Lester among the Cannibals of the Far West."

Ted and Joe, meanwhile, in place of writing out their Latin exercises, were engaged in that absorbing game called, I believe, "The Nine O's." After some time a triumphant "There to *there!*!" from Ted, made Mr. Lester look up.

"Are those your exercises, boys?" he said with ominous calm.

"Not exactly, sir," was the bland reply from Ted.

"Are they finished, then?"

"Not quite, sir."

"Bring that paper to me, Edward."

Ted obeyed with obliging readiness.

The paper referred to bore the following lines, besides the fascinating game already mentioned :—

"Old Lester is a fool,
Thinks he knows enough to set up a school.
But we know far more than him
Though he looks so wise and so precious grim."

Mr. Lester read this exquisite and talented production in silence. Then he said coldly,

"Ah! It seems a pity that your fancy for verse-writing should not be encouraged, Edward; so you can write out and bring to me to-morrow three pages of Virgil, which I shall mark for you before I leave."

"Well, I just won't then," was the blunt answer, "so you needn't trouble yourself!"

Mr. Lester flushed a dark red.

"Do you mean to say you defy me, sir?" he said sternly.

"I mean to say I'm not going to write out all that rubbish," was the dogged answer.

The flush upon Mr. Lester's face faded, leaving it rather white.

"Very well, we shall see," he said, controlling his

voice with difficulty. "Miss Ida," to the giggling Blinks, "attend, if you please. Where is Peru?"

Blinks looked at the ceiling, the floor, and finally out of the window for inspiration; and at last was heard to mutter something about the borders of the Black Sea.

Mr. Lester drew a long breath.

"Did you look over this?" he said with a resigned air.

Blinks moved uneasily in her chair, but did not answer.

Her tutor handed her the book in silence, and proceeded to cross-examine Nancie on a portion of English history, during which examination it transpired that Stephen of Blois had come over with the Conqueror in 1066, had married Queen Elizabeth two years later, and subsequently signed Magna Charta in consequence of the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot. At this startling sequence of events the boys simultaneously fell from their chairs in fits of laughter; and Nancie, in a sudden paroxysm of rage, was just about to rush from the room, when the door opened and Kitty entered.

Mr. Lester thought he had never seen her look so sweet. Poor man, I daresay it was a welcome relief for his eyes to rest upon her lovely face and graceful figure, after the sullen or giggling countenances, and not too tidy toilettes of his unmanageable pupils.

He rose and shook hands. Kitty noticed at once the

tired harassed look in his eyes, and said sympathetically (for she had vivid recollections of assisting the boys to prepare their lessons before their abrupt dismissal from St. Ann's),

“Have they been worse than usual to-day, Mr. Lester?”

Mr. Lester raised his eyebrows in eloquent silence.

“Auntie sent me to ask you,” went on Kitty, with a reproving shake of her head towards the boys, which was received by these reprobates with open derision, “if you will kindly allow the boys to have a holiday to-morrow, as our cousin is coming, and—” But she was interrupted by an avalanche of boys, who almost smothered her with bear-like caresses.

“Sweet Kitty, pretty Kitty, *darling* Kitty!” they shouted in concert. “Say *two* holidays, and we'll be like angels!”

“Are *we* not to have a holiday?” inquired Nancie with a hostile glare.

“No—you will go to school as usual,” said Kitty, stooping to kiss them each separately; “we only want to send the boys off for the day—so **that** we can get Cousin Dick comfortably settled before they come back.”

“Will you make piles of sandwiches, and a thundering big cake, and give us a lot of oranges?” inquired Ted judicially.

"Well—" assented Kitty half-doubtfully. "Yes—I will, if you'll promise to do your lessons well to-day."

"Done!" put in Roy, "and we'll go to Drayton wood for moths. A decent cake, mind, with raisins in it?" he added, as he dipped his pen manfully into the ink.

"And we might have a bag of nuts, too," supplemented Joe.

"Oh yes," agreed Kitty. "And Mr. Lester, auntie says she will be pleased if you will stay and have a cup of tea with us to-night."

"It is very kind of your aunt, Miss Kitty," said Mr. Lester with a tired smile; "but I have a very bad headache, and a good deal of work to do when I get home to-night, so I fear I must beg to be excused."

"Oh, I say, you know, why didn't you tell us you had a headache?" exclaimed Roy, looking up quickly. "You don't suppose we'd have plagued you so if we'd known?" For Roy was a warm-hearted lad, and his feelings were easier to touch than either of his brothers, though he was, as a rule, of rather a reserved and undemonstrative disposition.

Mr. Lester smiled faintly again, and moved across the room to open the door for Kitty.

"I've got toothache!" observed Ted in an injured kind of way, as he grudgingly drew the Latin dictionary towards him.

"And I've got stomach-ache," murmured the incorrigible Joe.

"Shut up, you young asses!" muttered Roy fiercely, under his breath.

If Mr. Lester heard this dialogue, he judiciously took no notice of it, but returned to his seat again, and patiently assisted the little girls through their obviously unlearned tasks, until some faint idea of their meaning permeated their little, wandering wits.

The boys, under Roy's laudable (and unusual) example, were wonderfully tractable, getting through their lessons with considerably less than the average amount of wilful errors, and with no insubordination to speak of.

CHAPTER III.

SHOWING HOW AGATHA HAD ASPIRATIONS.

"And those who in modest usefulness have accepted what seemed to them here the lowliest place in the Kingdom of their Father, are not, I believe the least likely to receive hereafter the command, 'Friend—go up higher!'"—*John Ruskin.*

AGATHA and Kitty occupied a good-sized room at the end of a long corridor. A smaller room opened off it, and was shared by Nancie, Blinks, and Baby May; the latter slept in a small crib, and was Nancie's special care.

On the night of the day mentioned in my last chapter, Agatha, clad in a blue flannel dressing-gown, was brushing out her long wavy hair before the looking-glass; and Kitty, in her night-gown, was curled upon the bed, reading, for the third time, a letter which had come by that evening's post.

"I don't see how I can go, Agatha," she said at last, with a sigh.

"There's nothing to prevent you," said Agatha, dreamily, for she was thinking of something else. "Aunt Prue wants you to go."

"Nothing—except clothes!" answered Kitty in a mournful tone. "You see the Duncanes are so well off; they don't know what it means to want a five-pound note; and Nellie always dresses so beautifully."

"How long do they want you to stay?" asked Agatha, who was now carefully plaiting her hair into two long shining tails.

"She says a month," Kitty answered, referring to the letter. "Listen :—"

"Do stay a month, dear Kitty" (wrote Miss Duncan). "I am sure we shall have a good time, and much better fun than last time. The boys are all at home, and wild to see you. I write in good time, so that you may keep yourself disengaged."

("As if I should have any other engagement!" said Kitty ironically.)

"Bertie's friend, Gerald Charteris, is coming," went on the letter, "you remember him last autumn, when you were here?" (Here Kitty blushed, and folded up the letter)

There was a somewhat lengthy pause; then Kitty said, • • •

"I'll get up early for the next week and do up my things, and I daresay I shall manage. There'll be plenty of time to make up my new serge—for Nellie says the end of next month. I wish you were coming, Agatha."

"I don't care about it," answered her sister, as she slowly got ready for bed.

"I've been thinking very seriously, Kitty," she went on after a pause, "of what I mean to do with my life. You see now that we've left school altogether, it seems as if there must be something cut out somewhere for us to do. I mean to ask Mr. Endicott to let me have a larger class in Sunday-school, and I shall make all these poor boys and girls my special care—visit them and read to them if they are ill, and save up my pocket-money to buy things that I think they need. Mr. Endicott promised some time ago to give me a district too, so that I can leave tracts and visit among the poor and sick. I think it will be a beautiful life. Shall I ask him to let you have a class too? You know you've never had one. Or would you rather just have a district?"

"No I think I'd rather not have either. I feel far too ignorant myself, do you know, to teach other people," said Kitty humbly. "It's different for you, you see, because you could always remember things better than I could. And besides, there are the boys—our boys, and the little girls. I really think they need us more than the village children do. And dear Aunt Prue—there are such a lot of little things she likes us to do. I think our work is pretty well cut out for us at home."

"Oh Kitty dear, that's not the way to look at it," said Agatha, her pretty face looking almost beautiful in its

earnestness. "If every girl buried herself in her own home, how could any Christian work be done among the poor? We must give up something."

"It doesn't seem right to put the poor before one's own family though," objected Kitty. "There are plenty of people who have no home duties. We have our brothers and sisters to help and teach and look after. Why neglect them for dirty little wretched children we don't care a straw for?"

Agatha made an impatient movement.

"You know very well the boys and girls of our family are hopelessly unruly and disobedient, and not the least like any other family anywhere," she said.

"No indeed, they are not the least like any other family *I* have heard of," assented Kitty, laughing heartily; "but they are dears, and I adore them, mad and wild and mischievous as they are."

There was a pause; then Kitty skipped off the bed, ran across the floor with her little bare feet, and looked at herself critically in the looking-glass.

"Agatha," she said slowly, after a prolonged inspection, "do you think I should look well with my hair piled on the top of my head, as Hettie Dewhurst wears hers?"

"No, I don't," was the emphatic answer. "It looks so Frenchified and frivolous. I think it is such a waste of time to think so much of one's dress and appearance. I am going to begin to dress quite—*quite*—plainly—"

"We could hardly dress more plainly than we do," put in Kitty drily.

"Ah, but I mean to do without all unnecessary ornaments—feathers and frills, and jewellery, and all that sort of thing," was the grave answer. "I am not even going to wear my new locket that Uncle John gave me. I almost wish my hair hadn't that little wave in it. It looks so worldly!"

Kitty turned, and looked at the speaker steadily.

"Agatha—you never used to have these kind of notions. It is only within the last few weeks. Don't, darling," she went on, throwing her arms round her sister's neck; "don't grow into one of those staid, goody creatures like Eliza Maurice, talking nothing but Sunday school, and thinking everything wicked that's jolly or beautiful, and being a general damper all round."

Agatha shook her head.

"You don't understand, dear," she said gently. "I must do what I think right."

"Well, I shouldn't tell the boys if I were you," observed practical Kitty, as she hopped into bed, and curled underneath the bed-clothes, "for they'll torment your life out."

"Yes, I shall," returned the other almost solemnly. "I know that will be a part of my discipline. Mr. Endicott spoke so beautifully to me to-day of the discipline we must all submit to if we really wish to live a

higher life. We can't crucify our worst selves without meeting many crosses and trials."

"But we're sure to have crosses and trials enough of some kind or other, without looking out for them," objected Kitty. "I can't think what has made you take up such ideas all at once."

"I have felt restless, and anxious to find some special work to do ever since I left school," was the earnest answer; "and something Mr. Endicott said some weeks ago made me think more seriously than ever that I ought to have some higher aim in my life than just going on helping Aunt Prue to keep house, and trying to civilize the boys, and dusting, and cooking, and making one's own clothes. Oh I am sick of it all! It is so petty, so unsatisfying, such a narrow groove to run in all one's days."

Kitty was silent.

"And by-and-bye," continued Agatha, as she put out the light and climbed into bed, "after a few years, I mean, I shall go out as a missionary on some foreign station—Mr. Endicott says it is beautiful work, and so satisfying—and *then* I shall feel that I am really doing something for the cause. Here, of course, one's sphere of usefulness is very much restricted."

Kitty bounced away to the extreme edge of the bed; still in silence.

"Kitty, how coldly unsympathetic you are!" said

Agatha in a reproachful voice. "I thought you would have worked with me in this."

"No thank you," said Kitty shortly. "One of that kind in a family is enough. I could almost fancy you were Eliza Maurice herself. 'Sphere of usefulness'—'the cause'—'narrow groove'—'special work'—'higher aim'! I hate the very sound of these meaningless phrases. But it's all that Mr. Endicott. None of the girls about the place found anything the matter with their grooves, or spheres, or aims, while poor deformed little Mr. Kincaid was here. I don't like Mr. Endicott. He may be very good, but he talks too much about what he does, and makes his admirers do the same. I was reading somewhere that girls are always more outwardly religious in parishes where the clergymen are young and unmarried than in those where they are elderly and married. And I believe it is quite true. Dear old Mr. Henniker is twice as good, and yet you never take any notice of anything *he* says."

"Mr. Endicott's being married or otherwise has nothing to do with it," was the rather indignant answer. "I wish you would let him talk to *you*. I know you would feel impelled to lead a better life—"

"I *do* want to lead a better life," burst out Kitty passionately; "but not that kind."

"It is the only other kind," persisted Agatha quietly.

"I don't think so," said Kitty, banging her pillow

wrathfully. "I want to be a good woman, and I ask God every night to help me ; but I've no desire to be a walking monument of starched religion, if that's what you mean. I want to help the boys, and the little girls too, to have a good time, and to help dear Aunt Prue by-and-bye when she gets less able to do as much as she does now. And I want to improve myself too, and get over my tomboyish ways, and my bad temper. But I'm not going to take Eliza Maurice as a pattern, and I'm not going to make a nuisance of myself by going into poor people's houses who don't want me, and preaching to people who are as good and very likely better than I am. *We* shouldn't like people coming here asking us if we were living Christian lives, and reading chapters out of the Bible just when we were waiting to begin our meals. It doesn't do them any good ; they don't like it, and I don't wonder. Old Neil Gardner swore dreadfully when we left his cottage, that day you asked me to go there with you. I heard him, though you didn't. His dinner must have been quite cold, for you chose the very longest chapter in Isaiah. And I made up my mind then that I never would be so cruel and unfeeling. And when we got back poor Aunt Prue had tired herself nearly to death in the kitchen, cooking, and had one of her dreadful headaches all the next day. And now I'm going to sleep—so good-night," she concluded suddenly.

"Oh, Kitty," began Agatha.

But Kitty pulled the bed-clothes over her head, and would not listen.

In the middle of the night a small white figure carrying a lighted candle, stole out from the inner room, and touched the sleeping Kitty on the shoulder. Kitty did not stir, but Agatha moved drowsily.

"What is it, Nancie?" she said in a cross voice.

"Blinks has dreadful toothache," said the figure in a loud whisper. "She's been crying for a long time." And indeed a piteous though subdued wailing was distinctly audible from the other room.

"Oh tell her to lie down and go to sleep ; it'll soon pass off. And do take away that light," murmured Agatha impatiently. And turning over she prepared to go to sleep again.

But Kitty had wakened up, and now cheerfully crawled out of bed, blinking sleepily the while.

"Hush!" she whispered, when Nancie had explained her mission. "Run and tell her to try and not cry. I'll be there in a minute, and I'll put some stuff in her poor little tooth. Leave the candle, dearie."

Nancie crept softly away. Her sister followed her presently, and poor weeping Blinks was soon lying curled up in Kitty's arms, cotton wool with some infallible specific in the aching tooth, and a soft woollen shawl wrapped round the hot little head. Soothed and com-

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forted, the child soon fell asleep, and Kitty stole noiselessly back to bed again, stopping as she went to cover up Baby May, who had tossed off the bed-clothes, and now lay curled up like a tiny hedgehog at the foot of the bed

CHAPTER IV.

POOR DICK.

"If one had a dozen lives or so, it would be all very well; but to have but a single ticket in the great lottery, and have that drawn a blank, is rather a sad sort of thing."—*Oliver Wendell Holmes*.

THE boys were not sorry they were to be out of the way when their cousin arrived. They had the curious, nameless repulsion towards any unknown bodily deformity, so natural to all very young healthy creatures; and they hardly liked to picture, even to themselves, what Cousin Dick's particular deformity might be. It was enough for them that he was a cripple.

They did not get back until nearly tea-time; and immediately learned from the excited Blinks that, "Cousin Dick had come, and that he had legs and everything, and such a nice face, and did not look queer at all, except that he couldn't walk." Somewhat reassured by this rather confused statement, the boys, tea being over, trooped sheepishly into the library, which was henceforth to be considered Cousin Dick's particular

domain. It had another room opening off it, which was fitted up as Dick's bedroom. The library faced the south, and had long French windows opening into the picturesque but sadly neglected gardens. A small room across the corridor had been assigned to Atkins, Dick's faithful attendant, so that he might be always at hand when his master wanted him.

Cousin Dick was lying on the couch beside a cheery fire ; Aunt Prue was seated opposite ; while Agatha and Kitty, curled up on the hearthrug, were talking, as Roy said "sixteen to the dozen."

As the boys entered, Dick turned his head, and held out his hand with a kindly smile. His appearance was a very agreeable surprise. He had a pale, clever-looking face, with heavily-lashed grey eyes, and a well-cut mouth shaded by a long fair moustache. The eyes held an indescribable sadness ; the almost sternly-cut lips told of wearing, long-continued physical pain—aye, and mental pain too. But of course the boys did not observe all this. They were only conscious of a feeling of relief that no visible deformity met their eyes. Joe's next thought was that Cousin Dick was even more "grown-up" than they had fancied he would be. As a matter of fact he was twenty-six, though he looked much older. Ted decided that he didn't look as if he had anything the matter with him at all ; and Roy, as he glanced at the broad shoulders and long limbs, mentally calculated three

if he were standing up—this invalid Cousin Dick—he would be a “thundering big fellow, bigger than Uncle John.” Then he remembered that Cousin Dick never would stand up again—never at all ; and a wave of pity swept over his boyish heart, making him feel and look awkward and depressed. But Dick’s manner, quite free from all unpleasant assumption of superiority, soon put all three boys at their ease. He knew all about moths and butterflies, it appeared, and was evidently interested in the subject, thus winning Roy’s heart at once, for boys are quick to discriminate between real and feigned interest. He was acquainted, too, with the ways and habits of rats, rabbits, ferrets, and other animals dear to the boyish soul, thus establishing a bond of interest with Ted. Finally he earned Joe’s everlasting respect and affection by promising to present him with an old violin which he—Dick—had at home. For Joe, under all his impish ways, had a passion for music, and was wont to excruciate the ears of his family by evoking hideous and soul-maddening sounds from a fearful old instrument of the violin species (possessing only three strings), which had belonged to his father.

The conversation had just reached this point when Nancie entered, bringing Baby May to say good-night. The latter, having climbed upon the sofa for the purpose, stroked Dick’s face with her chubby little hands, aid in a cooing voice,

POOR DICK.

“Poor boy! Poor boy! Baby May will kiss you.”

Dick took the little creature in his arms, and kissed her silently. There was a curious wistfulness in his eyes as they followed the tiny figure to the door, and Aunt Prue’s heart ached as she saw it; for she knew that his thoughts had gone back to a little dead sister of his own, who had died years ago, and of whom he had been very fond. He did not talk much after Baby May went away, and soon afterwards Aunt Prue dismissed the boys, who, the first inevitable constraint having worn off, were now becoming rather uproarious. Then the girls also bade their cousin good-night, for he was terribly tired with his long journey, and Atkins came in to wheel his master into the other room.

That night when the two elder girls went to bed, they were unusually silent. At last Agatha said,

“Poor Dick! how sad it is for him. Do you know, Kitty, Aunt Prue told me this morning that he was engaged to be married, and that when he knew he would be an invalid all his life, he offered to release the girl from her engagement, and she gave him up at once.”

“How horrid!” exclaimed warm-hearted Kitty. “I should have married him all the same, and nursed him, and petted him, and made him forget he was not just as strong and well as ever.”

“Well, she thought differently,” said Agatha. “And the worst of it was, she married someone else three months afterwards.”

"He was well rid of her, then," observed Kitty bluntly, "if that's the kind of girl she was."

"Ah, but he was very fond of her, and it almost broke his heart, Aunt Prue says," was the sober answer.

"She was a wicked *beast*, and I hate her!" broke in an excited voice from the door which divided the two rooms.

And behold! there stood Nancie in her nightgown, her cheeks crimson, her eyes blazing, the picture of passionate indignation.

"Nancie, you are a very naughty girl," said Agatha severely, "prying about listening to what was not meant for you to hear!"

"I wasn't prying about," retorted Nancie indignantly. "I only came for the cold cream for my chilblains. I couldn't help hearing what you said about Dick. You shouldn't speak so loud if you want to have secrets." And seizing the jar of cold cream, she marched into the other room, banging the door after her.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH NANCIE FINDS A FRIEND.

"There are chords in the human heart—strange varying strings—which are only struck by accident, and respond at last to the slightest casual touch."—*Charles Dickens*.

IT was wonderful how soon Dick identified himself with the family. By the time he had been an inmate of the Court for three weeks or so, everyone felt that it was quite an old-established fact that Dick's room should be the resort of old and young alike, that he should be taken into everyone's confidence, and share all their vexations and pleasures and perplexities. But alas! there were sad days when Dick could speak to no one, when he was racked with cruel agony—agony terrible to witness, though borne almost in silence, that when it had passed, left him white and weak, and helpless as a baby.

On one of these days, Kitty went in to wish him good-morning—for the attack had not come on until he was dressed and in the library.

"Dick!" she cried in dismay; for he was lying with closed eyes, clenched hands and teeth, and great drops standing on his forehead. "Oh, my dear, are you worse? Oh, Atkins, is he?"

But Dick neither spoke nor opened his eyes; and Kitty burst into terrified tears.

"Sure, miss, don't look so scared," said Atkins soothingly, though his own rugged face looked sorely troubled. "He's often like this—faith! and sometimes far worse. I'll get him back to bed, and give him his medicine, and then he'll be aisier, belike."

But poor Dick spent a day of ceaseless bodily anguish; and at night, when his cousins stole in to say good-night to him (for he had sent to ask them to come), his voice was so weak and changed that they could hardly believe it was Dick's voice at all. His face too, was not like the face of the Dick they had known; it was ghastly pale, with dark shadows under the eyes, and his lips under his fair moustache, were white and dry. But his smile was as sweet and patient as ever.

The boys went away feeling curiously subdued, and all the next day were so unnaturally good that Kitty was conscious of a vague anxiety lest they were going to be ill, or meet with some accident, or perhaps die. But she need not have feared, for on the following day they were even worse than usual.

They began the morning with a pillow-fight, in which

one of these bulky missiles smashed a gas-globe and a looking-glass, and subsequently flew through a window-pane.

Aunt Prue was in bed this morning with a bad nervous headache ; and these imps turned on the tap of the tea-urn when Agatha, who was presiding, was not looking, thus flooding the table-cloth, and ruining their enraged sister's morning-gown.

They tied Kitty into her chair with Blinks' skipping-rope ; and when Nancie boldly cut her sister's bonds with the bread-knife, carried off the rescuer, screaming and kicking, to the kitchen, and plunged her bodily into the flour-barrel, whence she was hauled forth by Sarah the cook, who, purple with rage, chased the delinquents all round the kitchen garden, and finally, just as she was within a few yards of Ted, fell over the prostrate body of Joe, who had placed himself there for the purpose. They buried Blinks and her beloved Oliver Twist up to their necks in a heap of wet sand at the foot of the fruit-garden, and kept them there until they were forcibly rescued by old James, the gardener, who got himself drenched with the garden hose for his pains. They exasperated Mr. Lester until he so far forgot himself as to use some very strong language, which created a precedent for the boys using similar expressions unreservedly in his presence for the next three weeks. Finally they all three concealed themselves under the

table at tea-time, and at a given signal (it was when Kitty said, "Where are the boys?") seized one end of the table-cloth, and pulled, hand over hand, with such a will that it rapidly slid from the horrified eyes of the assembled family, and landed the whole tea-equipage, with its attendant plates of bread and butter, &c., in a hopeless heap upon the floor. Baby May seized the jam-dish as it passed her on its way to destruction, and revelled unobserved in fathomless sweetness, unheeding the babel of tongues around her. To crown all, the conspirators had pulled the unsuspecting Nancie from her chair to join them in their dark retreat, and now loudly declared that she, and she alone, was responsible for the catastrophe. She, as usual, shrieked and struggled; and, to "calm her angry passions," as he blandly observed, Joe poured the contents of the milk-jug upon her head.

Poor Nancie! Her paroxysms of inarticulate rage were an inexhaustible source of delight to her incorrigible brothers. Blinks's helpless struggles and good-natured giggling remonstrances soon palled upon them; but there were always delightfully "affording" possibilities in passionate, hot-tempered Nancie. To goad the unhappy child to the verge of madness, and then jeer at her impotent fury, was, they considered, "no end of fun."

Blind with rage—and milk—she seized two cups, and breaking one upon Joe's head and the other upon Ted's,

she fled from the room, through the hall, and down the corridor to the library, where she flung herself on the hearth-rug beside Dick's sofa, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

Dick, considerably startled, laid down the book he had been reading.

"Why, Nancie, what's the matter?" he said, in his kind gentle voice.

Nancie came to the side of his sofa, and let herself fall in a quivering little heap on the floor.

"Oh Dick, Dick, I wish I was *dead!*" she sobbed despairingly.

"My dear little girl, that is a terrible thing to say," he said in a very grave tone, taking her tenderly within his arm. "Why, Nancie—what have you been doing to your hair?"

"It was *them!*!" burst out Nancie, with a fine disregard of grammar. "The boys. They poured milk over it. Oh, I hate them all, I do—I do."

"Hush, hush!" whispered Dick soothingly, as he rubbed the soaking little head gently with his pocket-handkerchief. "Have you had tea?"

"No!" with another burst of tears, "they've pulled everything off the table."

Dick frowned slightly. He had been a mischievous boy himself, and could make allowances for boyish fun; but he thought—and with reason—that the Ruthven

boys carried their jokes at times considerably beyond the line which divides fun from rudeness. However he only said,

"I am just going to have tea, so you can have yours here with me."

"Oh can I, Dick? And may I pour it out instead of Atkins?"

"Certainly."

"Oh Dick, I *love* you so! I wish you were my brother instead of those wretches! No one cares for me but you!"

For somehow Dick seemed to understand her, and comfort her as none of her own family ever took the trouble to do. And her hungry, desolate, loving little heart worshipped him with a faithful, almost fierce adoration, which half-amused, and half-saddened him.

With her last words she flung herself upon his breast, and kissed him passionately again and again.

"Take care, dear," he said, wincing slightly.

"Oh Dick, I didn't mean it! Did I hurt you?" she exclaimed in a distressed voice. "I forgot."

Just then Atkins entered with the tray, and was told to bring another cup and plate.

Whereupon Nancie, full of pride and importance, poured out the tea, and helped Dick to toast.

"Somehow, it seems so much easier to be good when I am here alone with you," she said after a pause.

Dick smiled.

“Does it?” he said, as he watched the earnest little face, that looked almost pretty just now in spite of the tear-stained cheeks, and soaked little tails of hair.

“Do you like to have me pour out tea for you, Dick?” was Nancie’s next wistful remark, when some time had passed.

“Very much indeed. Not any more, dear, thank you.”

“Oh, Dick, why? And you haven’t eaten your toast Aren’t you hungry?”

“Not very. I have rather a headache to-day,” he answered, closing his eyes wearily.

“Am I bothering you?” she asked, with an anxious look at his face. “Shall I go away?”

“No, no—I like to have you.”

Here there was a sound of muffled thumping at the door, and a shrill little voice was heard calling,

“Baby May want to come in. Open the door.”

Upon the door being opened a festive little object appeared, whose face, from the nose downwards, was literally covered with raspberry jam, which also plentifully bedewed her pinafore.

“Baby May eated all the jam!” she shrieked with hilarious glee, dancing delightedly first on one leg and then on the other.

Dick laughed.

“Take her into my room, and wash her face and

hands, Nancie," he said. "And then she shall have a piece of cake."

"Shall have a piece of cake!" echoed the little maiden, complacently, as she trotted after Nancie into Dick's bedroom, whence she emerged a very clean-looking little girl indeed, and minus the jammy pinafore.

Nancie had also paid some attention to her own personal appearance, which was an improvement.

A goodly portion of cake having been disposed of by, Dick's visitors, Atkins came in to remove the tea-things, and make up the fire. Baby May, being provided with paper and pencil, stretched herself face downwards upon the hearthrug, and with her little tongue out as far as it would go, speedily covered the paper with innumerable dabs and strokes which she was pleased to name horses, dogs, cats, and other domestic animals.

Nancie curled herself up on a small velvet stool beside her cousin, and taking one of his hands in hers, kissed each finger separately.

Not one of the family would have believed what capabilities for loving were concealed in wayward, bad-tempered, misunderstood Nancie. Indeed none of them had ever seen the real Nancie; and her alternate bursts of rage and affection only strengthened the generally-received belief that she was "a queer child," whom nobody could understand. Her experience was

that whatever she did was wrong, and that nobody cared—except to snub her cruelly and unmercifully. So that her cousin's never-failing kindness and sympathy filled her poor little heart almost to bursting with passionate gratitude. And the grieved look in Dick's eyes one day when he had seen her for the first time in one of her ungovernable fits of fury, had made her feel more sorry and ashamed than all her aunt's gentle lectures, and her sisters' thoughtless reprimands.

"How is Aunt Pruc?" said Dick presently. "Is she better?"

"I think so; but she is still in her room. You see the boys are so noisy; it would make anyone worse who had a headache. Is yours very bad, Dick?"

"It is, rather."

"You're sure talking doesn't make it worse?"

"Quite sure."

There was a short silence; then Nancie said,

"Kitty is going away to-morrow. She is going to stay with the Duncanes in Derbyshire."

"So she told me."

"Are you very fond of Kitty, Dick?"

"Yes, I think I am."

"Do you think she is pretty?"

"Yes, very."

Nancie sighed.

"Dick—don't think it queer of me—but *do* you think

I shall ever be pretty? Not *very* pretty, like Kitty or even Agatha; but just a *little*?"

Dick smiled as he stroked the rough black hair.

"Yes, Nancie, I think you will. You sometimes look pretty now—when your hair is brushed, and your face clean, and when you are in a good temper as you are just now."

"Really, Dick?"

"Really, Nancie."

"Then do you think that if I try to be good and tidy, and not to hate people, and get into rages, that perhaps by the time I am as old as Kitty, I might be nearly as pretty?"

"I think it is more than likely."

"I will try, then," was the determined answer.

"But, my little Nancie, is that going to be your only motive for trying to be good and gentle?"

"No," she answered, laying her hot cheek on his hand.
"I am going to do it to please you as well."

"And is that all?"

Nancie coloured, and moved uneasily.

"Nobody cares but you," she muttered. "The boys don't, nor Agatha, nor even Kitty. And I know Aunt Prue thinks I'm as bad as I can be, and worse. I believe I should have died, or run away, if you hadn't come. Nobody cares but you—nobody at all."

"God cares," said Dick very gravely. "He sent you into the world to be first a helpful cheerful little girl, and then a good useful woman. I know it is not always easy to be silent when we are quivering with anger, or to be patient and kind when people seem to hurt us wilfully and cruelly. But, my little woman, we can't always have things just as we would like them in this world."

"I daresay I shall be better when I'm grown-up," said Nancie with a heavy sigh.

"How? If you give way to all your tempers and evil passions now, do you think you can crush them all at one blow when they have grown strong and fierce because you have nursed them and fostered them for years? If you want to be a good woman, you must begin by being a good little girl, Nancie."

"It's so hard!" sighed poor Nancie.

"Most things are hard that are worth doing at all," said Dick somewhat sadly.

"Do you ever feel very wicked, Dick?" she asked, lifting her dark wistful eyes to his.

"My little Nancie, yes—very, very often."

"But you haven't a temper—a frightful temper—like mine?"

"On the contrary, I have a very bad temper indeed," answered Dick quietly.

"What?—as bad as mine?" she exclaimed.

"Yes—quite as bad as yours."

"And how did you get over it?"

"I haven't got over it yet, Nancie. I am often in a very bad temper even now."

"You never look as if you were."

"Perhaps not," her cousin answered somewhat shortly.

"Then Dick, as you know what it is—perhaps you will help me? Will you? I will try so hard."

"Certainly, dear, if I can," said Dick, with his grave tender smile.

"But there are so many other things," went on Nancie, despairingly, when she had thanked him in the loving impetuous fashion she kept for Dick alone. "I wish you would tell me the faults you most notice in me, Dick," she added, laying her rough little head down on his arm.

"Shall I, Nancie?"

"Please do."

"Well—I think I know a little girl, who when she is asked to perform any trifling service for her brothers or sisters, or even her Aunt Prue—glooms, or pushes her shoulders about in a very ungracious way; and if she does what she is asked to do, does it in a manner that shows she does it only because she must, not because she likes to do it. Who never laughs good-naturedly at her brothers' jokes—which I admit are trying, at times—but behaves more like a little savage when they tease her, than a civilized little girl. Who never runs to do

errands for anyone, or tries to save anyone trouble, or to do what she has to do cheerfully and lovingly ; and who finally does not seem to love anyone, or be at all interested in anyone, except a certain Cousin Dick, Baby May, and—Nancie Ruthven ! ”

Nancie’s eyes filled with tears, and her lips trembled.

“ Have I been too hard, little one ? ” Dick said compassionately, bending his head to look at the quivering averted face.

“ No—no,” she whispered in a forlorn little voice. “ I know it is just me—exactly. But—it seems as if I never *could* be any different, and as if it would be no use trying. And I can’t *bear* the way the boys tease me.”

“ My little Nancie,” said Dick, taking both her hands in his, and speaking in a quick uncertain kind of way, “ we never know what we can bear until we are tried. If anyone had told me a year ago that I should have to lie from morning till night in one position—a helpless, useless log—with nothing on this earth to look forward to but suffering, and disappointment, and pain—” He stopped suddenly, and bit his lips. The growing passion of regret in his voice startled his hearer ; and indeed for the moment he had almost forgotten Nancie’s presence.

But nothing he could have said would have touched the warm, loving, childish heart as these few words had done. Child as she was, Nancie seemed to realize, all at once, what a terrible thing life must be for Dick,

who was so patient and uncomplaining—while she, who could run about as she would, who hardly knew what pain meant—was so discontented, and so impatient of everything that vexed her.

“I will try,” she whispered, with a curious kind of awe in her voice. “Oh Dick—I will try. I promise.”

“That’s my brave little Nancie,” he said faintly. He was lying quite still, one hand covering his eyes. He looked very white, Nancie thought.

There was a silence after that. Baby May had fallen asleep on the hearthrug, her pencil still clasped in one fat little hand. The fire flickered gently.

And poor wayward Nancie registered an earnest vow then, which I think affected all her future life. She failed often, poor little woman, in the days that came after, and repented with bitter tears; for we do not conquer our worst selves in a few months, nor even in a few years. But Dick’s words had fallen upon good soil, and were to bear fair fruit in the time to come.

CHAPTER VI.

ODDS AND ENDS.

"Thus they did persist,
Did and said what they list."

Denham.

KITTY went away the next forenoon, in radiant spirits, and a bewitching new gown. Aunt Prue had managed marvellously in assisting her niece to augment her scanty wardrobe. Kitty could not understand, as she privately confided to Agatha, "how auntie *had* managed it." Perhaps cousin Dick could have told; but no one suspected this, except Aunt Prue—who knew. Just before Kitty went away, Dick had presented her with an exquisite little gold watch and chain, which sent her half wild with delight. Agatha had their mother's watch; but Kitty had long sighed for one in vain. Aunt Prue had remonstrated and spoken of extravagance when Dick shewed it to her on the morning it came down from town. But he had said half-sadly,

"Dear Aunt Prue—I haven't very many pleasures. Don't deprive me of this one. It is as much to please myself as to please Kitty."

The house seemed strangely silent without pretty, happy-hearted Kitty. She had many faults, being only a very human little person, but she had the sweet gift of lovableness, and that kind of sunny pervading personality, which makes its absence felt almost to pain. Agatha missed her very much; but not so much as she had done last time; for Mr. Endicott—at her earnest desire—had given her an extra class of ragged and unruly little boys and girls to teach four days a week, and in attending to their bodily and spiritual wants she was feverishly happy. As for the boys, they grumbled continuously, and declared that “everything was beastly” without their beloved madcap sister Kitty. Otherwise, at the Court things were going on in their usual fashion.

One night about a fortnight after Kitty's departure, they were all assembled in the library. The schoolroom, of late, had been almost deserted in the evenings; and as for the faded, old-fashioned drawing-room, it was universally shunned, except on these rare occasions when Aunt Prue had visitors to tea, when an unwonted fire was lighted in the wide, low grate, and gave it an air of comfort and home.

Dick liked to have the whole family about him; and, unless on his bad days, their noises did not seem to disturb him. With him the boys subdued their exuberant spirits, had fewer squabbles, and left the girls comparatively in peace. On the night I speak of, Dick

was feeling stronger and better than he had done since his last severe attack of pain, and was examining with interest, and the air of a *connoisseur* in such matters, Roy's latest batch of moths, which were newly "mounted," and smelt outrageously of some objectionable chemical; Blinks was playing cat's-cradle with Baby May; Joe and Ted were comparing notes upon certain coins which they had begun to collect under Dick's supervision; Agatha was "getting up" her next lesson for her Sunday scholars; and Nancie, with unusual patience, was holding a skein of wool for Aunt Prue to wind. A great fire was blazing upon the hearth, almost out-shining the shaded lamp which stood on a table near Dick's couch.

Suddenly Joe looked up from his coins, and said,
"I say Dick, I can play 'Cherry Ripe' on my violin.
I played it seven times last night after I was in bed."

"So I heard," answered Dick, smiling slightly.
"Oh, I say, did it waken you?" asked the embryo
musician, with faint symptoms of remorse.

"No, I wasn't asleep. You played it very well; but
why did you stop so suddenly in the middle of a bar?"

"Oh, Roy and Ted emptied the water-jug over me,"
was the cheerful answer. "They don't like if I play
when they want to go to sleep, you know."

"My dear boys," exclaimed Aunt Prue, "you must
not do such things. You know what a cough poor Joe
had a few months ago."

"Ah, it was a fine cough that, Joe," observed Roy with brotherly sarcasm. "It always got very bad just at lesson-times, and stopped like clock-work whenever Lester's back was turned. It was uncommonly bad too, when it was time to get up in the mornings."

"Oh, you shut up," growled Joe, getting rather red.

"Play for us, Agatha dear," said Aunt Prue, seeing symptoms of a coming storm. "Run and open the piano, Blinks."

"Yes, play something, Agatha," chimed in the boys. "We haven't heard the sound of the piano since Kitty went away, except for Nancie's abominable scales and exercises in the schoolroom."

Nancie opened her mouth for a suitable and stinging reply ; then meeting Dick's grave eyes, she bit her tongue almost in two that it might keep silent.

For the boys' objections to Nancie's somewhat monotonous performances on the pianoforte had reached a climax upon the previous afternoon, as follows :—

Joe (who being under a promise to Kitty, was laboriously ploughing through his exercises for Mr. Lester) had three times vainly exhorted her to "stop that awful row." At last, becoming infuriated, he threatened that if she did *not* stop, he would throw an egg at her. Unfortunately a basket of these useful articles of diet was on the table ready to his hand. Nancie, however, had stoically taken no notice, and before another minute

had elapsed, a good-sized egg was launched, with unhappily correct aim, at the back of her head. As this example was at once followed by Ted and Roy, poor enraged Nancie was soon a pitiable object; and the worst of it was, that as the boys speedily effaced themselves, Agatha, who came in just then to convey the eggs to an old woman in the village, cast the whole blame upon Nancie, and shook her soundly.

But to return.

"Play, Agatha," repeated Ted, leaning over to tweak Baby May's hair.

Agatha looked up from the Bible and Concordance upon her lap.

"Oh, I can't play just now, boys," she said, wrinkling her pretty brows in distress. "I must study this. I have to question my class to-morrow on the reign of King Hezekiah,—and I don't know much about it myself."

"Pooh! King Hezekiah! Who wants to know about him!" observed Joe scornfully. "Tell them about King Pippin; they'll like that a heap better!"

"Joe—it's very wicked of you to joke upon sacred subjects," exclaimed Agatha, with flaming cheeks.

"Hezekiah wasn't a sacred subject," objected the incorrigible Joe. "He wasn't a subject at all. He was a king. A king can't be a subject."

Agatha did not deign to reply to this sparkling

witticism ; but returned to her books with a little toss of her head.

"Oh, let her alone !" put in Roy with lofty contempt. "We don't want to hear her play. Let her keep her music for her Sunday scholars. Besides, her playing isn't a patch on Kitty's. I wish people would ask her to visit them, and leave us our dear old Kitty. *She* was never too busy to do what a fellow asked her."

"Kitty spoils you," said Agatha sharply, but with a little choke in her voice. "She gives you all your own way, and laughs at your silly jokes, and makes you think so much of yourselves that there's no living in the house with you," she concluded passionately.

"Ah ! we're losing our temper, aren't we ?" said Ted, with a provoking grimace. "My word ! you'll soon be as bad a spitfire as Nancie."

"The boys shall whistle, and Baby May shall dance her own little dance," put in Aunt Prue judiciously at this juncture, "before it is time for her to go to bed."

Baby May at once scrambled to her feet, repeating gleefully,

"Baby May shall dance own little dance."

This dance of Baby May's had been taught her, with infinite care and pains, by the boys and Kitty ; and the mite always went through it with cheerful and pains-taking conscientiousness whenever it was asked for. As this was pretty often, she now required very little

prompting, and executed all the manifold steps, curtsies, and slides with an earnest gravity that was irresistibly comical, especially as the tip of her tiny red tongue was always visible, and in spite of continual remonstrances, always would re-appear. One figure in which the small *danseuse* folded her arms and struggled through a travesty of the "rocking-step," was always received with shrieks of laughter and applause by her instructors. She invariably overbalanced herself in this figure, but always jumped up instantly and began again. The only tune to which she would dance was "Old Dan Tucker." Kitty sometimes played the absurd old air on the piano; but Baby May's special delight was when all three boys whistled it together, clapping their hands the while, as they were doing to-night.

Just as the performer, excited to ecstacy by the approval on the faces of her family, was in the very zenith of her glory—her little face crimson, her blue eyes dancing, her curls bobbing wildly up and down—a loud crash was heard in the corridor, followed by a smothered cry.

Joe and Ted stopped whistling, executed a rapid succession of winks expressive of subdued delight, and rushed towards the door. Baby May, hopping on one leg, followed them. Aunt Prue rose hastily, and laid down her knitting.

"What on earth is that?" she said nervously.

Upon the door being opened Atkins was discovered, picking himself up from the floor of the corridor, which was strewn with the shattered remains of a large China lamp ; fortunately it had not been lighted.

" Atkins ! what has happened ? Are you hurt ? " exclaimed Aunt Prue.

" Sure—something caught me fut, mum," was the breathless answer. " I don't know at all what it was, bedad."

" Why, here's a piece of string stretched right across the corridor, from one wall to the other ! " cried the too-observant Blinks, stooping to reconnoitre.

And sure enough, fixed firmly about a foot above the floor, was a piece of strong, tightly-stretched whipcord.

" Hold your tongue, you little idiot," muttered Joe and Ted savagely, as they hastily unfastened one end of the treacherous cord.

But Atkins was to quick for them. His hot Irish temper was thoroughly up ; for he had fallen with considerable force, and had cut his left hand badly with the broken glass. In a twinkling he seized the delinquents by their jacket-collars, and marshalled them into the library.

" Sure, Mr. Dick, look what these two young divils have been up to now ! " he burst out excitedly. " It's by the Lord's mercy the lamp wasn't lighted, for I was in two minds to do it. Then I thought I'd bring it in onlighted,

in case this one had enough oil to last for the night, and just at the door, if they hadn't fastened a string for the purpose av catching me fut—and it's small thanks to them the whole household isn't burnt aloive! Faith, an' it's a sound thrashin' they both need."

"Oh, Atkins! come and have your hand bound up," exclaimed Aunt Prue in horror. "Blinks, run and tell Ellen to pick up the broken glass, and wipe up the oil. Boys, I am exceedingly angry with you. You, Roy, as the eldest, ought to be above such unmanly tricks. If the lamp had been lighted, the whole house might have been burned down."

"It wasn't Roy," cried the culprits, who having wriggled away from Atkins' detaining grasp, were now standing on their heads and hands against the wall festive and unrepentant. "We did it all."

But Aunt Prue had hustled out of the room, followed by the indignant Atkins.

"Naughty—*naughty* boys!" said Baby May, stamping her little foot. "Baby May *won't* love you."

"Ted and Joe, come here!" said Dick, in a voice none of his cousins had ever heard before.

The boys, shamefaced but giggling, approached the sofa.

But Dick's face—white with anger, his flashing eyes, and the stern look about his mouth, rather sobered them. His brows were heavily contracted, his right hand opened

and shut with a nervous force which showed he was suppressing some violent emotion. For Dick had (as he had told Nancie) a frightful temper. It was difficult to rouse, but when it was roused, he felt the effects of it for days afterwards.

Joe began to edge towards the door.

"Stay where you are, sir!" said Dick. And though he did not raise his voice in the least, Joe felt it must be obeyed.

"It was only a little joke," muttered Ted.

"It is a joke that shall not be repeated," said his cousin, still in that queer voice. "Agatha, take the little girls away. Roy, you may go."

They all went but Nancie, who full of dismay, ran to the sofa.

"Dick—don't send me away!" she cried.

"Leave the room, Nancie!" he said curtly—so curtly that her eyes filled with tears.

"Did you hear me, Nancie?" he said in a very stern voice.

She went slowly out, shutting the door after her.

Nobody ever knew what Dick said to the boys. They came out looking pale and scared, and went up to bed at once, without saying good-night to anyone.

Next morning Dick was very ill—so ill that he could not leave his bed. And his cousins did not see him again for some days.

CHAPTER VII.

THE NEW SCHOLAR.

“ Oh surely here are signs
Should soften your rigidity ;
This gentleman combines
Politeness with timidity ! ”

Bab Ballads.

AGATHA did not find her district-visiting quite such a delightful occupation as she had fancied it would be. For one thing, the new curate (Mr. Endicott) had gone abroad as a missionary ; and Mr. Henniker, the elderly vicar, was not nearly so enthusiastic as his curate had been. Agatha's scholars, too, had become more than she could manage, somehow. They were unruly and disrespectful, besides being unwilling or unable to receive the instruction ~~as~~ she so earnestly desired to impart to them. But she tried her best ; and certainly she abandoned all other duties for their sakes.

One snowy Sunday afternoon in December when she went into the schoolroom, she found, to her surprise, that her class included one more boy than usual. He was as ragged as the most rabid vagabond-hunter could

desire ; his face was liberally begrimed with mud, or soot—or both ; and a bandage was tied cornerways across one eye. Altogether, he was a most deplorable-looking object. He pulled a dusty forelock as Agatha took her seat, and said in a high-pitched voice with a strong Irish accent,

“ If ye plaze, miss, Mr. Henniker tould me to come to-day, and ask ye to tache me out of the good book, and help me to be a betther boy, an’ not brake me poor ould mother’s heart as I’ve been asther doin’.”

Agatha was interested at once.

“ What is your name ? and where do you live ? ” she said gravely, drawing the grimy little object towards her as she spoke.

“ Me name’s Barney Milligan, miss ; and we’ve just come from Cork, me ould mother and me, to live at the end of the village yonder.” This with a jerk of his head towards the window.

“ Mr. Henniker did not tell me about you,” said Agatha.

“ No, miss, we just came yesterday ; an’ mother, she sez to me, ‘ Barney,’ sez she, ‘ I’ve heard great things of a young lady livin’ here—that she spinds all her toime doin’ good, and that it’s more fit for a blessed angel she is than anything else, and, Barney,’ sez she, ‘ if she takes ye up, ye’re made, but, sure, it’s yer last chance.’ So when I saw ye comin’ in at the door, miss, lookin’ so

good and swate—and me havin' heard so much av ye—sure a feelin' came over me that I'd been a wicked little baste, and—and—" Here Barney faltered, rubbed his dirty knuckles in his one visible eye, and howled loudly over his sins.

The rest of the class were much impressed; and Agatha coloured with pleasure. This, indeed, was gratifying—to hear that her name was spread far and wide as a helper of the poor and ignorant! She put her arm round the sobbing child, and said in a moved voice,

" You are a very dear little boy, to confess your faults so bravely. I am quite sure you will be a great comfort to your mother by and bye. But how did she hear of—of me?"

" Sure, it was a gentleman came to Cork, miss, three wakes ago," answered Barney readily—" a missionary he was—and sez he to mother, ' There's only wan on earth that can do for Barney, Mistress Milligan; an' if yer goin' to England, ye may see her.' Then he mentioned yer name, miss, an' the tears was in his eyes, an' mother was cryin', and begorra, misilf cried too."

Agatha was fairly trembling with excitement and triumph. Could it be Mr. Endicott who had spoken of her so kindly—so admiringly?

" What is the matter with your eye, Barney?" she inquired after a moment or two, trying to speak calmly.

"Sure, miss, it was a boy in Cork, he threw a stone, and bruised me oi."

"Poor child!" was the sympathizing answer. "Now, Barney, there is one thing I must tell you, and that is that I should like you to have a nice clean face and pair of hands next Sunday. Will you do that for me?"

"Sure, miss, I'd doi for ye!" and the knuckles went into his eyes again.

Agatha felt the tears come into her own eyes as she saw that the poor little fellow was quivering all over with the violence of his sobs. So with a few consoling words she dismissed him to his seat.

Being a new scholar, Barney was not required to say any lessons to-day; so he sat quietly at the foot of the class and listened respectfully to all that was going on. Mr. Henniker (who by the way, had not replaced his late curate) was not at the schoolroom that day, so Agatha had not an opportunity of telling him how pleased she was with her new pupil. She *could* have wished the latter a shade less dirty; but that would no doubt be rectified next Sunday.

At tea-time she gave a graphic and stirring account of the interesting little waif, describing him in glowing terms, and almost melting into tears as she told of the unknown missionary's gratifying account of her work and influence.

"I saw a dirty-looking little beast with a bandage

over one eye prancing about the village to-day," observed Ted, helping himself lavishly to tea-cake. "If that's your new specimen, I don't think much of him."

"You can't always judge by appearances, my dear Ted," said Agatha loftily. "I have had enough experience now among the lower classes to distinguish the false from the real."

"Oh my! ain't we grand!" cried Joe, going off into ecstasies of laughter.

"Did the boy tell you the name of the missionary?" asked Nancie, with interest. "He must be a nice man, I should think."

"No; and I don't know who it could have been," answered Agatha with a conscious little smile and blush. "Unless, Aunt Prue, I was thinking it might be Mr. Endicott. You know he was always most kind to me."

"But he wasn't going to Ireland," said Aunt Prue doubtfully; "he was going to the Zambesi."

"Perhaps he went to Ireland first," suggested Roy gravely. "I shouldn't wonder if a missionary or two would come in handy there."

"At any rate, it's very gratifying to think that any thing I have done should have made such an impression on him," said Agatha, gazing in a thoughtful way at her teaspoon.

"He'll be coming home to *marry* you, Agatha!" burst out Ted jocosely. "What fun! Oh, my eye—look at Agatha blushing!"

"What rude vulgar creatures you are, boys!" said Agatha with flaming cheeks and angry eyes, as her brothers howled with laughter at this novel idea. "You have no feelings of delicacy at all!"

"Not a rap," replied Joe cheerfully. "If you want delicacy, and black eyes, and dirt—you must go to Barney Milligan."

Agatha bit her lip, and put on what Ted called her "high and mighty air."

"Poor dear!" jeered Joe. "And did we tease her about her missionary—and did she not like it!"

"Endicott's Bride!—or the Queen of the Cannibal Islands!" shrieked Ted, waving his bread and butter above his head.

"That will do, boys," put in poor distracted Aunt Prue. "How can you be so unkind!"

But her words had no effect; and by the time tea was over, Agatha was in a very unchristian frame of mind indeed.

Next morning she related the Barney Milligan incident to Dick—who listened in silence.

"Dick!" she exclaimed almost pettishly, "you don't seem to take the slightest interest. Anyone would think you didn't approve of my slaving myself to death over the poor and unhappy among my fellow-creatures."

"My dear girl, it is not my place to approve or disapprove," Dick replied quietly. "But don't you

think you have undertaken too much? You are getting thin and nervous, and are, I am afraid, overworking yourself."

"I must sacrifice something," was the restless answer.
"I do feel tired sometimes; but it is nothing."

"But is it only yourself you are sacrificing, dear?" he said, with a softened look in his steady grey eyes. "Don't you think you might find scope for all your best impulses and energies among your brothers and sisters?"

"No, indeed, I do not," she answered quickly. "Why, you are as bad as Kitty. You must see, Dick, how different it is. Mr. Endicott, at least, evidently appreciated me!" she added with mingled pride and reproach in her tone.

"We don't know that it was Mr. Endicott," answered Dick in his kind grave voice. "Nevertheless, dear, if you feel you are doing right—"

"Doing right!" flashed out poor Agatha. "I don't think there can be any question of *that*. Of course, Dick, your views of life are necessarily limited; you cannot, perhaps, understand how one may feel bound to have a wider sphere than one's own fireside—" She stopped; for at her words her cousin's face had flushed painfully, then paled again.

"You forget," he said rather bitterly, interrupting her as she was about to make a confused apology, "that I

have not always been obliged to take such a limited view of life, and things in general."

"Oh, Dick, forgive me!" she said, conscience-stricken at the look in his usually gentle eyes. "I—I forgot."

Before Dick had time to answer, Baby May danced into the room, followed, pell-mell, by the boys.

"I say, Dick, look here," they exclaimed, all speaking at once, "Freddy Turner has brought us a bullfinch, and he says he'll learn to whistle anything. He can do 'Pop goes the Weasel,' and lots of things—and we're going to teach him 'Old Dan Tucker,'—for Baby May to dance to."

"For Baby May to dance to!" echoed that sprite, bobbing about with glee.

The bullfinch was a fine little fellow, with an air of assurance and self-possession not at all disturbed by the rough hands in which he found himself. He hopped about in his rather dilapidated-looking cage, nibbling grains of seed, and taking sips of water in a calm, business-like way which seemed to denote that he felt quite at home.

"Did you buy him from Freddy Turner?" inquired Dick, after examining the new-comer with interest.

"No; we exchanged him for a pair of lop-eared rabbits," explained Ted.

(Ted's rabbits, ferrets, &c., had been rather in the background lately; for a new era had begun with that

young gentleman. Fired by the perusal of a tattered military romance lent him by Atkins, who by the way was an ex-trooper in the —th Lancers, he now felt certain that no vacation in life was worth following save that of his father—a cavalry officer.)

"His name is Tommy," broke in Joe. "He's a stunner. Ain't you, Tommy?"

Tommy chirped in cheerful acquiescence; and was then and there accepted as one of the family.

* * * * *

Agatha was confined to the house with a severe cold during the following week; but she insisted upon going out on Sunday, first to church, and then to Sunday-school. Her new *protégé* Barney Milligan did not present himself until the lessons were well under way; and then, behold! the little reprobate appeared in exactly the same state of sooty untidiness as on the previous Sunday. If anything, the bandage over his right eye was a shade or two dirtier—that was all.

Agatha looked disappointed.

"Why, Barney," she said in a tone of grave disapproval, "how is this? I thought you promised me you would be clean and tidy to-day?"

"Bedad, miss, an' I clane forgot!" replied the unabashed Barney.

"But you must not forget what I tell you," said his young teacher severely.

"Sure, miss, it's like one av the angels ye look today!" was the audacious answer. "And it's mesilf tha knows ye wouldn't be asther scoulding a poor boy that hasn't tasted food since the day before yesterday."

Agatha softened somewhat at this melancholy statement. Then after a moment's thought she said,

"If you are a good boy and say your lessons well, you shall come home with me and have tea—and as much as you can eat—you poor little creature."

Barney expressed his delight and gratitude by instantly standing upon his head and hands on the seat—a performance which gratified his fellow-pupils immensely, and caused Mr. Henniker to call out with an assumption of sternness in his jovial voice,

"Order there, boys, order!"

Agatha had not yet had an opportunity of speaking to Mr. Henniker regarding her new pupil; indeed she secretly desired that he should not renew his acquaintance with that fascinating youth until some slight change for the better should be made in the latter's personal appearance.

Barney's spirits were almost too high during the remainder of the lesson. He stuck a pin into the boy next him, and pulled the hair of a demure little maiden who sat at his right hand. He gave alarmingly irreverent answers to Agatha's questions; asked her the most outrageous questions in his turn (with a face of

childlike innocence); and altogether set his classmates a atrocious example.

When Agatha rose to go, he attached himself to her once; and in a few minutes this strangely-assorted pair were walking rapidly down the frost-bound village street, where many curious eyes turned to look after them.

Agatha's cheeks burned, in spite of her philanthropic ideas, for she had hardly realized what a fearful little object Barney really was until he emcrged into the bright winter sunlight. There was something irresistibly comical too, about the very way the bandage was tied over his eye and stuck out in two perky little tails behind ; and his deplorably dirty face and clothes presented a curious contrast to Agatha's neat and dainty fur-trimmed costume. But she walked on bravely, permitting his grimy little fingers to grasp her neatly-gloved ones, and instilling careful little maxims into his ears as they went, to which he meekly replied, "Yes, miss," "No, miss," "Av coarse, miss,"—at becoming intervals.

When they were half-way to Ruthven Court, they met Roy and Ted, accompanied by Major. (Major, I ought to have mentioned before, was a shaggy wiry-haired black terrier, very ugly, and of no particular breed, but of almost preternatural sagacity.) To Agatha's surprise, Major flew up to Barney, barked joyfully, and careered around him with every demonstration of joy. This

pleased her very much ; for as a rule Major disliked and distrusted those whose garments were not beyond reproach, and was a sworn foe to all the vagabond species. But the behaviour of Roy and Ted did not please her at all ; for after a brief glance at poor Barney, they burst into what Agatha called "one of their vulgar roars," and simply rolled about the road in agonies and screams of laughter—and also, I regret to add, in their Sunday clothes—shrieking,

"Oh, what an object!—what a sight! Oh lor! oh lor!"

Agatha was deeply indignant.

"You cruel, unfeeling boys!" she exclaimed, trying to pull them up by their jacket collars—a vain effort, I need not say—"How *can* you make fun of the poor little fellow! See—he is crying ; and no wonder!"

"Is he—is he coming—home to tea?" gasped Roy between his paroxysms. "*What* a lark! Oh my goodness!"

Agatha took out her handkerchief to dry poor Barney's tears ; but his knuckles did duty as usual.

"Never moind, miss," he said in a quavering voice. "Sure, it's loike enough that young gintlemen should laugh at a poor boy loike me. There was a toime, miss, when I'd have fought them both ; but since ye spoke to me so swate, an' tould me what was right, I know that them feelin's is wrong an' onchristian."

Agatha shot a triumphant glance at her brothers ; then taking Barney's hand tenderly in hers, she led him away.

But Roy and Ted lay on the ground and laughed until they nearly cried ; while Major barked and growled, and finally rolled over and over as if he were laughing too.

Arrived at the Court, Agatha took Barney straight into the library ; for she wanted Dick to see him just as he was, and wanted him to know, too, that she had not been ashamed to walk through the village with her *protégé*, thus nailing her colours to the mast, as it were. The rest of the family, with the exception of the boys, were all beside Dick, as usual. Baby May, perched upon a chair by the invalid's sofa, was combing his hair and moustache with a doll's comb.

They all gazed in amazement as Agatha and her companion entered. Roy and Ted, dishevelled and out of breath, followed them almost immediately.

"Aunt Prue," began Agatha hurriedly, "this is little Barney Milligan. He has had nothing to eat for days ; and I am going to give him a good meal. And perhaps he might have a suit of Joe's old clothes—I am almost sure they would fit him."

"And perhaps he might have his face washed," observed Roy derisively.

"I say, Barney, who's your tailor?" jeered Ted, tweaking the bandage which decorated Barney's eye.

"Oh, Aunt Prue, isn't it *too* bad of them?" burst out Agatha with flashing eyes, springing towards her insulted pupil.

But Barney was quite able to fight his own battles.

"Young gintlemen," he said, facing his persecutors, and folding his arms tightly across his chest, "ye think 'becas I'm a ragged boy that ye can take yer fun off me. But let me tell ye if it wasn't for yer swate sister there I'd foight the pair av ye—savin' yer prisince, miss. But I can't stay in this countrry," he continued, with a sudden wild choke in his voice. "I've troid me best, but I see the gintry, they'll always laugh at me. And whin I go back to Oireland, miss, an' see the gentleman, sure I'll tell him that all he said av ye was true, and—and it's my belafe, miss, that yer name'll be known in Greenland's icy mountains, and—and—" Here poor Barney, unaccustomed to those flights of eloquence, was overcome by emotion, and throwing himself upon the ground, burst into loud sobs, which were heartlessly ridiculed by the Masters Ruthven.

Agatha knelt down beside him.

"Hush, my dear little Barney," she said soothingly. "You must not mind what my brothers say. You have pleased me very much; and if you go on as you have begun, and try to be quiet and respectful, I have no doubt you will be one of my favourite pupils."

Barney's sobs subsided.

"Now, come and have something to eat," she continued, assisting him to rise from his dejected attitude.

"Moight I ask wan favour, miss?" he said in a very low voice.

"Certainly," was the gracious answer.

"Before I have me tay, moight I just have a taste of thim kind o' cakes Mr. Endicott tould me av? Sure, he said they tasted loike Heaven."

"Oh, Aunt Prue, he must mean the rock-cakes!" exclaimed Agatha, (delighted to have the identity of the discerning missionary confirmed)—"Mr. Endicott used to say he never tasted them anywhere else."

"Rock-cakes, yes, miss, that was the name," respectfully put in Barney.

"May he, Aunt Prue?" said Agatha, with a flushed, excited face.

"I think tea and bread and butter would be better for him," answered Aunt Prue doubtfully; for hospitable and charitable as the dear old lady was, these rock-cakes were her special pride, and a luxury not even permitted to her own nephews and nieces except on very special occasions.

However, her gentle objections were over-ruled with a high hand by Agatha; and the cake-basket, full of the tempting little cakes in question, was placed at the disposal of the starving Barney, who immediately helped himself liberally.

"Don't you think he might have his hands washed first?" observed Nancie, who had been watching him suspiciously.

"I'd rather taste these first, miss, *if ye plaze*," was the subdued reply, as another cake disappeared. Then the speaker went on, addressing Agatha, "Sure, it's the happy lady ye must be, miss—doin' good all yer days. I just wish I was the brother av ye. I suppose ye'll just be a slave to thim, belike?"

Agatha looked uncomfortable: while Roy and Ted laughed derisively. Barney dispatched a few more cakes, and the family looked on with mingled dismay and interest.

"An' if I moight make so bould, miss," went on the engaging young stranger, speaking as distinctly as a boy can when his mouth is quite full—"if I moight make so bould as to say that yer brothers should be proud av ye! Mr. Henniker was sayin' to me yesterday, sez he—'Miss Agatha's the only lady in the village wh'll go to glory—'" But this rambling eulogy on Agatha's virtues was cut short by Baby May, who had slipped down from her chair, and now exclaimed indignantly,

"Naughty, *naughty* boy—has eated *all i'* cakes!"

"Sure, miss"—began Barney, regarding her reproachfully.

But Baby May, after staring at him in a bewildered way for a few moments, began to laugh, and danced up and down delightedly.

"It's *Joe!*" she cried in high glee—"Joe wif a dirty face!" And stretching up her little hand, she pulled down the bandage—and behold! a pure white triangular space with a totally uninjured brown eye, which twinkled wickedly. Yes, it was Joe!

Roy and Ted, who had, of course, been in the secret all the time, seized Baby May and shook her. But she only danced about, and repeated, amid ripples of laughter,

"Baby May *knew* it was Joe!"

Aunt Prue and Dick, who had been completely taken in, went into fits of unwilling laughter. They really couldn't help it. Nancie and Blinks looked respectively disgusted and mystified. As for Agatha, she looked for a few moments as if she really did not know what to do with herself. She was not left long in doubt, however; for Roy pulled her forward with one hand, while naughty Joe took the other, and the former shouted in a sing-song voice,

"The great boy-tamer, Miss Agatha Ruthven, and her latest success! Admission one shilling. Children in arms not admitted."

"Sure, miss, d'ye think yer brother's clothes 'd fit me?" whined Joe, poking his sister rudely in the side. "You are a very dear little boy!" he went on, with a droll imitation of Agatha's voice and manner. "Oh, my stars, you should have seen her, auntie—doing the

moral swell. Baby May, you little wretch—I'll never forgive you! I meant to have kept up the joke for ever so long."

But poor Agatha could bear no more. After glaring at her tormentors in speechless rage for a second or two, she tore herself from their grasp, and rushed from the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

KITTY SURPRISES HER FAMILY.

"If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange
And be all to me? Shall I never miss
Home talk and blessing, and the common kiss
That comes to each in turn : nor count it strange
When I look up, to look on a new range
Of walls and floors, another home than this?"

Mrs. Browning.

KITTY had been away for a month, and it was within a week of Christmas Day. The boys were beginning to grumble ; for Christmas without Kitty was not to be thought of.

But one snowy morning at breakfast-time, a bombshell descended upon the house of Ruthven. Aunt Prue received a letter from Kitty, and the news it contained was such that the recipient having read it exclaimed,

"Good gracious! Oh, the child must be joking!"

"What is it?" shouted a surprised chorus.

"You don't mean to say she isn't coming home at Christmas?" put in Roy hastily.

"Oh yes, she is coming home the day after to-morrow,"

answered Aunt Prue, taking up another letter, and opening it as she spoke.

"Hurrah! Hurrah!" shrieked the family, in their most uproarious style.

"My dears," implored Aunt Prue, looking round her nervously, "I do wish you would make a little less noise. I want to read your Uncle John's letter."

There was a partial lull, during which Aunt Prue finished Uncle John's letter, and carefully replaced it in its envelope.

"I say, Aunt Prue, what is it? Is it about Kitty? Is she coming home? When is she coming?" burst out a storm of impatient voices.

"My dears," said Aunt Prue, looking uncertainly from one to another of the excited and eager faces around her, "your sister Kitty is engaged to be married!"

The boys, petrified, gazed at each other open-mouthed. Then Joe, shutting one eye, said jeeringly,

"Oh, I daresay, auntie! That won't do, you know! It's *much* too thin. Kitty's not such a flat."

"My dear, it is quite true," said their aunt, absently pouring out the coffee. "Your uncle has given his consent, it appears."

"Who is she engaged to?" asked Agatha, after a dismayed silence all round.

Aunt Prue looked at Kitty's letter again.

"A Mr. Charteris, she says—Gerald Charteris, I think

it is. Kitty does write so badly. Yes—Gerald Charteris."

"I say, Aunt Prue," exclaimed Roy anxiously, "it's a plant, isn't it? It can't be really true."

Aunt Prue did not answer for a moment or two, then she said in a preoccupied kind of way,

"Yes, Roy. You don't suppose I should jest on the subject. Your Uncle John knows Mr. Charteris, it seems; and he says he has had a very nice letter from him."

"It's a jolly shame of Kitty!" burst out Ted, who had been sitting in amazed wrathful silence all this time. "I suppose she'll be going away to a house of her own, and there'll be nobody but Agatha!" And Ted flung himself out of the room.

"Who is the fellow?" inquired Roy with his most grown-up air. "We can't let our sisters marry people until we know all about them."

"If Uncle John approves, your opinion won't be asked, my dear boy," said Agatha, who was still smarting under Ted's rather cruel snub.

"Well, Uncle John had better find out all about him; and so I shall tell him," continued Roy grandly. "Kitty's far too young to be married. It was your turn first, Agatha."

"'Nobody axed me, sir, she said—sir, she said—sir, she said!'" chanted the provoking Joe. "Never mind,

Agatha dearie, Mr. Endicott is sure to come back for you. *He* appreciates you, thank goodness."

"Joe!" said Aunt Prue, quite sharply for her, "leave your sister alone!"

"We will leave thee, thou lone one, to pine on thy stem!" began Joe in a quavering voice.

But Roy promptly extinguished him by plumping the tea-cosy over his head.

A stand-up fight between Major and Oliver Twist here distracted the general attention. A continual war was waged between these two worthies, who entertained for each other an undisguised and hearty hatred. Major usually preserved a dignified and scornful silence when in the presence of his enemy (who, by the way, in spite of her name, was of the weaker sex); whilst she took various mean advantages of him upon every occasion, such as scratching his eyes or nose suddenly when he was asleep, springing out upon him unexpectedly from dark corners, devouring the lion's share of his meals, &c. The last mentioned offence Major could not and would not stand; and many were the conflicts which ensued. He rarely snapped at her; but this morning she had committed a most unprovoked assault upon him by biting his tail severely as he sat thumping that member rapturously upon the floor in expectation of stray pieces of broiled bacon. This outrageous attack roused his temper to such a degree, that with a savage

snarl he turned round, seized her by the neck, and shook her furiously. Whereupon a lively scene followed, enhanced by the loud singing of Tommy, the bullfinch, who was practising over and over again the first bars of "Old Dan Tucker," interspersed with various trills and shakes of his own. Blinks rushed to rescue her beloved cat ; but Joe held her arms, while Roy incited Major to further feats of valour.

From this Pandemonium Nancie rushed away to impart to Dick the startling news about Kitty ; and Aunt Prue re-read her letters as well as she could amid the deafening din. When peace was restored Major strolled into the garden, to console himself for the indignities heaped upon him by unearthing a couple of bones, which he had buried yesterday in a secluded spot under a cherry tree.

By degrees the whole family surged into the library, where Dick listened (with some difficulty it is true, for as usual, the family all spoke at once) to the lamentations of Kitty's brothers and sisters over Kitty's last exploit, and when he could get a word in, suggested that very likely, as Kitty was so young, the marriage would not take place for a year or two.

"But he'll want to come bothering here continually, like that fellow Gillespie did at the Hall when he was engaged to Sara Turner," burst out Ted, who was leaning against the window-frame, kicking the paint with his heels.

"Well, he may turn out to be a very decent fellow," said Dick smiling. "I don't think you looked forward to my advent in the family with much pleasure. Did you? And yet we get on tolerably well—eh?"

"Oh, you are an old brick!" returned Ted with affectionate irreverence. "We couldn't do without *you*. But this fellow—he'll be continually spooning around with Kitty, and making a blooming nuisance of himself."

"Not he," answered Dick consolingly. "He'll be able to go fishing and boating, and all that sort of thing; and you'll get on capitally."

"I wish I thought it!" muttered Roy in a dubious way.

"He must be a muff, you know," observed Joe conclusively, "or he would never want to get married!"

"Ted—Ted!" shrieked Baby May, darting into the room in great excitement. "Major has dot one of oo's rabbits, and is eatin' it!"

At this awful announcement the boys rushed out, with yells of rage, to inflict summary punishment on the offender; and Kitty and Kitty's lover became, for the time, minor considerations.

When Mr. Lester came in the afternoon he was at once put in possession of the news regarding the second Miss Ruthven; but, to the indignation of his pupils, he made not the slightest comment thereon. Nancie, who, had grown much more manageable and subdued of late

saw that he had become very pale, and that the hand holding her French grammar shook perceptibly.

"Are you sick, Mr. Lester?" she said, lowering her voice a little.

"No," was the curt answer. "Go on with your lesson, Miss Nancie."

"*J'aime*, I love ; *tu aime*, thou lovest ; *il aime*, he loves," went on Nancie glibly.

Poor Mr. Lester!—why was it the verb "to love" to-day? The little girls made glaring errors; the boys revelled in false quantities and other blunders; but to the secret amazement of all their tutor took no notice. Even Ted's outrageous statement that Julius Cæsar was the grandfather of Plato, was suffered to pass unrebuked. Indeed, Mr. Lester, as a matter of fact, was not listening. For through his brain there echoed ceaselessly Blinks' words of greeting,

"Kitty is engaged to be married!"

That same afternoon, just at dusk, Nancie was seated on her favourite little stool, beside Dick's couch. The room was lit only by the dancing flames of the blazing fire; through the windows one could see the snow lying thickly on the gardens and on the fields beyond.

Dick had been unusually weak and languid all day, and the all-powerful Atkins had sternly refused admit-

tance to all save Nancie. Aunt Prue and Agatha, of course, were free to go and come as they pleased. Atkins (as I think I have mentioned) occupied a small room on the opposite side of the corridor, so that no one could enter his master's rooms without his hearing them. He had already turned back Ted and Joe seven times, and Roy twice (and had been called "an interfering old beast" for his pains, by these unruly young gentlemen). Baby May and Blinks periodically charged down the corridor, to be seized by the imperturbable old soldier with the remonstrance,

"Sure, now, young ladies, make less noise, if ye plaze. It's not goin' in to worry Masther Dick ye are, so ye can run away."

Nancie, however, was a special favourite with Atkins (though she had bitten him viciously once, shortly after his arrival, because he had refused to allow her to taste a bottle of medicine which had come for his master), and to her the way was always clear.

Nancie had had severe intermittent toothache for the last few days, and was more silent—not to say sullen—than she had been for some time. She was not looking sullen just now, however; but was gazing thoughtfully and rather dejectedly into the fire, her hands clasped round her knees, and her hair wilder than ever.

"How is the tooth, Nancie?" asked Dick in his gentle voice.

"It still aches, but not nearly so much," she answered, moving her stool a little nearer to him.

"What were you thinking of so intently, just now?" he went on.

"I was wondering," she answered, turning her great dark eyes on his face, "how you manage to bear pain as you do, and never get cross. Now, to-day and yesterday I have been so fearfully ill-natured—you can't think how horrid I have been! And," she added mournfully, "I *did* hope I was improving a little bit; and now I am just where I was before."

"My dear little cousin," said Dick very tenderly, "do you suppose that a strong will and a hot temper like yours can be conquered with no trouble and no defeats at all? Why, Nancie, if a man makes up his mind to be a great painter, for instance—do you suppose he paints a first-class picture right off, with no struggles and failures, and no patient hard work? Not he—unless he happens to be a genius; and geniuses are few. He has to go through years of weary drudgery in the first place; he fails many times, and very likely despairs too, as you are doing; but if he doggedly fixes his mind and energies on succeeding, he *does* succeed—if he has average talent, and more than average perseverance. Now, we all have a latent talent for subduing our worst selves, as you told me Mr. Henniker said last Sunday. And most of us have to serve an apprenticeship to

the virtues, so to speak ; for ready-made saints are not sown broadcast over the world, any more than geniuses. Besides, do you know you have made great progress already—for such a novice in the art of self-control ? ”

“ Oh, Dick ! *do* you think so ? ” she said wistfully.

“ I do indeed. I have noticed a great many little things of late, which tell me that you have been trying very, very hard. And I know how difficult it is—for as I told you once before, I am an ill-tempered fellow myself.”

Nancie shook her head incredulously.

“ Quite true, Nancie. Sometimes it takes me quite all I know—on days when I feel specially knocked up—to be ordinarily civil.”

“ Does it to-day, Dick ? ” she asked doubtfully.

Dick smiled.

“ Not just now. One could hardly quarrel with a poor little woman afflicted with toothache. Besides, I feel much better to-night.”

“ Oh, Dick, fancy *you* quarrelling ! I think you are the kindest dearest darling in the world,” she exclaimed, imprinting a sudden kiss on his head. “ I sometimes wonder how in the world—” She stopped suddenly, and grew rather red.

“ Well, dear ? ” he said.

“ I had rather not go on,” she answered confusedly. “ It was something I had no right to say. You would be angry.”

"My dear child, you have a right to say anything you like to me. Tell me, Nancie. I promise not to be angry."

"Well—I was going to say I can't understand how that girl could—could break her promise to you."

"What girl?"

"Well, they said—Agatha and Kitty one night—that you were once engaged like Kitty is, you know—and that the girl—married somebody else!"

There was a long, long silence.

Nancie's heart beat fast. She stole a look at Dick's face; it looked sterner than she had ever seen it.

"Dick—are you angry?" she whispered breathlessly.

But Dick did not answer. He was biting his lips nervously under his long fair moustache, and there was a strange look in his eyes—a look few ever saw there.

"Oh Dick, *dear* Dick—don't look like that!" she entreated. "I had no right to speak about it. Don't be angry!"

"I am not angry, dear," he said at last, quite quietly—so quietly that Nancie never guessed the storm of fierce regret and pain that was raging in his heart. "But—it is, naturally, rather a painful subject, Nancie; and one that I can hardly discuss with a little girl like you. I did not know you—knew of it."

"I had no right to say it," she said, in a trembling little voice. "But I felt so sorry—and I *love* you so!"

And indeed—*indeed* I am not so childish or stupid as you might think—”

“I never for an instant thought you were stupid, my Nancie. But you can understand, I think, that it is not the kind of thing a fellow likes to talk about.” His brows contracted as he spoke, and he moved his head wearily and restlessly.

“Forgive me, Dick,” she whispered, squeezing his hand remorsefully. Then she deftly raised his head on her arm and shook up his pillows; for Nancie was developing many womanly little ways of late.

“Oh Dick, I wish”—she began impulsively, as she sat down again—“I wish that I—”

“What, dear,” said Dick in a faint voice, as she paused.

“I wish I was as old as Kitty; and then *I* could marry you—and take care of you, and be far, *far* better to you than that other girl could have been !”

At this *naïve* suggestion Dick bit his lip to suppress an involuntary smile.

“We won’t talk about it any more to-night, little one,” he said abruptly.

And at that moment Atkins entered with the tea.

CHAPTER IX.

CHRISTMAS.

" Hurrah ! my friends, let's give a cheer,
For Christmas comes but once a year.
Oh, come as in the good old time,
With gift and song, and tale and rhyme."

KITTY had come home, and to the relief of the boys, proved to be unchanged in every particular, save that she wore a splendid half-hoop diamond ring, and that, as her brothers boisterously informed her, "she looked more stunningly pretty than ever." Indeed, so like the old unengaged Kitty was she, that Ted confided to Roy and Joe next morning in the seclusion of the tool-house (where various Christmas mysteries were in progress) his firm belief that "the whole thing was a plant."

"Let's ask her!" said Roy with a sudden inspiration.

Upon which all three trooped off in search of their sister, found her, and conveyed her perforce to the tool-house—having previously hidden from view the mysteries before hinted at. There—enshrined upon an inverted flowerpot—she was put in the witness-box, so to speak.

"I say, Kitty," began Roy, with judicial severity, "look here! We want to know if it's a plant?"

"If what's a plant?" inquired Kitty, looking round at the various-sized flowerpots in a bewildered way.

"Oh you know quite well," growled Ted; "about you getting married, and all that rubbish."

Kitty blushed a lovely crimson; then she laughed and shook her head.

"No—but I say, *is* it?" continued Roy peremptorily.

"I am going to marry Mr. Charteris, if that's what you mean," said Kitty, looking at her plump little hand whereon Mr. Charteris's ring glittered bravely.

"Well, if you ask *me*, I think you're a great flat!" observed Ted impressively and frankly.

Kitty kicked her little slippers against the flowerpot, and made a face.

"Wait till you see him," she said with a saucy nod.

"What is he like?" inquired Joc, dropping from a cross bar where he had been executing some impromptu gymnastics.

"Is he as decent a fellow all round as Dick?" said Roy, with a shade of anxiety in his tone.

"Oh yes, I think he is quite decent all round," answered Kitty gravely.

"How old is he?" went on Roy. "As old as Dick?"

"Oh, *much* older."

"My eye! how much?" put in Joc. "As old as Uncle John?"

"No—o, not quite."

"Well, upon my word, Kitty, I would not have believed it of you!" exclaimed Ted, with such a supreme air of indignant disgust that Kitty went off into a gale of laughter.

"Now, no chaffing, miss," said Roy severely—"or you'll be sorry. When is he coming?—for I suppose he *will* be coming? Not for Christmas, I hope?"

"No, not till February," answered Kitty with a sigh.

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed a fervent chorus.

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Joe suddenly, "there's old James gone up into the loft. Let's go and take away the ladder."

Whereupon they all rushed out, eager for the fray—yes! Kitty too, I regret to say, engaged young lady though she was—and having confiscated the ladder, sat about the stable-yard, weak with laughter, listening to the indignant old gardener's vain protests and bad language until dinner-time.

* * * * *

Next day was Christmas Eve, and mystery reigned supreme; for everybody had got presents for everybody else, and nobody was supposed to know what gifts Santa Claus held for them—though as a matter of fact they knew perfectly well.

I have said that the Ruthvens were poor, and so they

were ; but for months before Christmas they always religiously began to save up their at-all-times-scanty pocket-money in order to present each other with the most ingeniously useless things on record, which they made various pilgrimages to Kelby, the nearest market-town, to purchase. But after all, the presents themselves were secondary considerations. It was the choosing them, the concealing them, and the presenting them wherein lay the pride and joy.

This was an ideal Christmas Eve, clear and frosty ; with a thin covering of sparkling snow over trees, lawn, and hedge-rows. Uncle John came down by the afternoon train, in his most genial mood, and encumbered with numerous thrillingly interesting parcels. He pinched Kitty's cheek as he kissed her, and told her gravely that Charteris was a very fine fellow, and that she might consider herself a very lucky young woman.

The evening was taken up by the dispatching of Christmas cards, and the tying up of various parcels. Baby May could hardly be persuaded to go to bed at all, so excited was she at the thought of what Santa Claus might bring her on the morrow. For every member of the Ruthven family hung up his or her stocking on Christmas Eve ; and the long passages and corridors were thick, shortly after bedtime, with various white-robed figures, tottering under many and curiously-shaped bundles. Even Dick was made to promise that a sock of his should be hung

out by Atkins ; and as for Uncle John, he would not have omitted the ceremony for the world. Kitty prepared to go to bed early, for she was tired, having been very busy all day in helping Aunt Prue in the numerous household matters which always crop up at Christmas time, besides being impounded by the boys for services all and sundry, as usual. Agatha was too much occupied in preparing treats for her Sunday-scholars to think of anything else. To do her justice, she worked very hard, and denied herself many things in order to benefit her little *protégés*. But she fretfully told Aunt Prue that she really had not time to arrange fruit, and dust the best plates, &c., &c.—and so the old lady performed these little services for herself ; for Kitty was making pies and custards, and Nancie and Blinks' experience among fruit and china had, hitherto, not been satisfactory. As Kitty passed the dining-room door, she was pounced upon by Uncle John, and became the recipient of a short and loving lecture upon the responsibilities and duties of an engaged young lady, which lecture the dear old gentleman had a confused idea was the correct thing, and which he brought to a close with an obvious air of relief.

" He is as I said, my dear, a fine fellow," he concluded. " I knew his father long ago, and met the son last year in Hamburg, where I saw a good deal of him. His family is good, his means are—er—most ample, and in

short, my dear child, I am very much gratified." And Uncle John blew his nose violently.

After which Kitty, having kissed him affectionately, went to bed ; which example was soon followed by the rest of the family, except Uncle John and Aunt Prue, who sat up until a very advanced hour. Major—who, as Atkins affirmed, was as wise as any Christian—knew quite well that it was Christmas Eve, just as well as he knew when it was Sunday, and sat up on purpose to inspect all the arrangements. As for Oliver Twist, she had a new family of kittens to attend to, and was therefore above mundane affairs.

Christmas Day always began very early with the Ruthvens. This one of which I write began at 4 a.m., at which hour Nancie and Blinks, and the three boys, had already seized their stockings and were examining them by gas-light. (It was a curious point of honour with these juveniles that not one of them would have touched a Christmas stocking until they had been asleep once, for however short a time. Then, as far as they were concerned, it was "morning.") As for Baby May, she slept like a little top until breakfast-time, in blissful unconsciousness that a lovely wax baby also slept—really slept, for its eyes were shut—at the foot of her crib, and that her tiny stocking was stuffed out of all shape and size.

A mysterious envelope was found in the toe of each of

the boys' stockings, containing in Dick's writing the following thrilling words,

"Look in the stable at seven o'clock on Christmas morning."

Happily, the stable was always locked at night by the careful and long-suffering "old James." (I suppose that worthy possessed a surname, but certainly no one at the Court had ever heard it. He was simply "old James—" nothing more.) So the boys were obliged to contain themselves until a more advanced hour of the morning. Meanwhile they speculated as to what they should find in the stable. To enter it without the key was impossible, as it was lighted from the roof; the key itself was inaccessible, for old James, when locked in slumber, was—as they knew from experience—as deaf as the proverbial adder.

The other contents of their stockings proved upon inspection to be highly satisfactory. Uncle John had presented each boy with a new pair of skates, and Aunt Prue had selected three good-sized books of adventure, in the thrilling depths of which they immersed themselves until the "dawn should break." Kitty had given them each a wonderful knife, combining, besides its own properties, those of a corkscrew, pair of scissors, and a file. The two little girls had jointly given them elaborately-worked pen-wipers, which I am sorry to say, after being admired, and pronounced

"jolly," by the recipients, were forgotten, left unused, and never heard of more. (In fact I am obliged to confess that the legs of the boys' trousers were their usual penwipers, as a rule.) Agatha gave them each a little book of a severely moral turn, all three of which were ultimately consigned to oblivion on the top shelf of the "boys' bookcase."

Shortly before seven o'clock the boys—after a hurried and soapless toilette—sallied forth to pounce upon "old James," and make him open the stable-door. To their surprise, however, it was already open, and old James himself was actually smiling in the doorway.

"A merry Christmas!" shouted the boys, as they rushed past him, pell-mell.

"A merry Christmas, young gentlemen," he responded almost genially.

Now the stable, I must mention, carefully though old James locked it at night, had never contained anything, so far as the boys remembered, of more value than two wheelbarrows, three spades, some empty barrels, an equally empty corn-bin, and a few hampers. Therefore picture their almost speechless surprise and ecstacy, when in the middle stall they beheld the most perfect brown pony that ever munched corn! He turned his head as his future masters entered, and tossed his mane and tail in a friendly way very delightful to see. Tied to his neck was a white ticket, with this inscription:

"With Cousin Dick's love to Roy, Ted, and Joe."

And upon the wall beside him hung a new saddle, bridle, and riding switch.

Need I say that in two minutes that pony was out of his stall! In other three he was standing, saddled and bridled, in the shady, flagged stable-yard. As Roy was the eldest, it was decided that he should be the first performer. All three boys' equestrian exercise had been confined, hitherto, to feats upon Farmer Cotton's donkey "Peter." Not such an ignominious graduation as one might think; for Peter had more tricks and evil ways than any donkey living, and none, save the Ruthven boys, ever dreamed of trusting themselves upon his rusty grey back.

So away Roy went; then Ted; then Joe. What a fellow to go the pony was, to be sure! After a few stirring gallops—and not till then—the thought of the donor occurred to them; and having watched with feverish interest while old James unsaddled "William of Orange," as it was unanimously decided to call him, they rushed frantically into the house, through the library, and into Dick's bedroom.

Dick had had a bad night, and had just fallen into an uneasy doze. He opened his eyes with a start as the boys trooped noisily in; and somehow his pale face and heavy eyes seemed to subdue them a little.

He smiled faintly as they approached the bed, and held out his hand.

"A merry Christmas, boys," he said in a weak voice.

"A merry Christmas, Dick. Oh, I say—he *is* a beauty!" burst out all three rapturously. "It was awfully good of you. He's a stunner to go, I can tell you—and such a jolly colour. We're going to call him William of Orange."

When the pony's merits had been discussed at considerable length, Joe exclaimed,

"I say Dick, have you seen your stocking? Shall we bring it in for you?"

"Not yet, I think," began Dick languidly.

But at this moment Atkins stalked in, and having grimly wished the intruders a "merry Christmas," turned them promptly out of the room.

Now, I hope, my dear boys and girls, that you don't expect I am going to give you a detailed list of all the Christmas presents given and received by the young Ruthvens? I am quite sure you are not so unreasonable. For one thing, it would take up (unnecessarily) far too much of your time and my paper; and for another thing, I really don't remember half of them. Everybody was pleased, however, and that was the main thing. One thing I do remember, and that was Dick's present to Nancie. It was a plain gold locket, with her name upon it in tiny seed pearls; and inside was Dick's own portrait—Dick as he had been before his accident, strong and gallant and happy. Nothing he could have given her would have pleased her more; and Dick knew this.

Somewhat Dick always knew just what people liked, and thought, and felt—as well as what they didn't like, and didn't think, and didn't feel. I suppose it was because he hardly ever thought of himself, that he had time to study other people so much. Very likely. You can't do both, you know—think always of yourself and always of other people. There isn't time.

Another thing I can remember was that Kitty was made very happy by a letter from Mr. Charteris, accompanying a parcel containing a handsome gold bracelet. And Aunt Prue had a mixed collection of very funny presents—not one of which she would have laughed at for untold gold. Dick, however, gave her a new black velvet gown, a thing she had secretly desired for years. As for Blinks—contented, happy, sunshiny little mortal that she was—all her presents were just the very things she had wished for. They always were, somehow.

The Christmas dinner-party was not large; for Aunt Prue, Uncle John, and Dick were the only relatives of the Ruthven family. The party was augmented, by the way, by Mr. Lester, who lived in lonely bachelor lodgings in the village, and an aged maiden lady called Scrope, whose presence at Ruthven Court on all festive occasions, was, for some inscrutable reason, indispensable. She was an intensely matter-of-fact old lady, rather cross-grained, rather deaf, and rather stupid. The boys disliked her, and could never resist the temptation to

"take a rise out of her," as they vulgarly expressed it. She thought them glaring examples of boyish wickedness, and was never tired of lecturing them, and correcting their speech and manners. They (the boys) were full of ill-repressed joy that Kitty's lover was not present at the Christmas dinner—at which feast, by the way, they always made it a point of honour, so to speak, to taste at least *twice*, everything upon the table.

Miss Scrope thought this gluttonous, and said so.

And Kitty read her letter over and over again, and looked at her bracelet, and longed for February.

CHAPTER X.

ROY DISTINGUISHES HIMSELF.

"The play——the play's the thing!"
Hamlet.

CHRISTMAS night, for the last three years, had always been the occasion of a "new and original play" by Master Roy Ruthven. His last three efforts had been painfully crude (which considering his age, was not at all wonderful); but this year he flattered himself that he had accomplished a work of art.

Rehearsals (in the tool house) had been going on for some weeks. The final representation was to take place in the drawing-room, which had a large deep bay-window raised by a few steps above the rest of the room, and therefore was singularly adapted for these performances. The window was also draped with heavy curtains, which arrangement was equally convenient. As the drawing-room was on the ground-floor, Dick's couch could be easily wheeled in. The spectators upon this occasion, besides Dick, were Uncle John, Aunt Prue,

Miss Scrope, Mr. Lester, and (under protest) Agatha, who now thought plays wrong, and would not have taken a part in one for worlds. The actors were Kitty, Nancie, Blinks, the three boys, Freddy Turner (the donor of the bullfinch), and as a crowning inspiration, Baby May, who was madly excited at the prospect.

The play was entitled "The Phantom Avenger," and was "run" upon somewhat hackneyed lines, so to speak

Frederic Montalban (Roy) had murdered in years gone by, his cousin Alphonso whose spectre (Joe) appeared at frequent intervals during the play. Frederic was now inspired by feelings of deadly hatred towards his whilom friend Gilbert Duval (Ted) who was betrothed to a certain Lady Gulnare, also beloved by Frederic. The said maiden, by the way, only appeared twice in the play ; the opinion of the talented author being that love-scenes were "bosh." In the second act the *rôle* of the maiden was taken by Blinks ; in the last by Baby May, as being more easily lifted about. Minor characters were sustained by Nancie and Fred Turner, who were male and female "minions"—and Kitty, who constituted the "orchestra," and took odd parts here and there when required.

At half-past seven the audience took their seats, and programmes (written at Roy's dictation by Kitty) were distributed. A good deal of scuffling was audible behind the curtain, mingled with muffled ejaculations and

wrathful complaints from the author, who was stage-manager as well. Baby May danced about among the "reserved seats," exclaiming joyously and importantly, "Ise to have on my new dress!"

At last after much whispering and giggling the curtain "rose," or, rather, was violently pulled asunder. In the matter of stage properties, &c., a good deal was left to the imagination of the audience. Happily they were not *exigeants*; so when they saw by their programmes that the first scene (which to the uninitiated looked very like a partially-lighted window recess littered with holly-branches) was intended to represent "a gloomy wood," they applauded good-naturedly.

ACT I. discovered Frederic stalking about the said wood to slow music, muttering to himself, and slapping his forehead at intervals. He wore rather a curious costume, which bore a striking resemblance to an ordinary suit of knickerbockers thickly sewn across and across with tinsel embroidery (which, I may mention in passing, was just what it was). On the hero's breast hung two medals of bright copper, showing Britannia looking over the sea. On his head he wore a gorgeous glittering helmet of unique shape and pattern. As his dignity would most assuredly have been hurt had anyone suggested that this helmet was an inverted jelly-mould carefully burnished up for the occasion, I shall not suggest it, but simply say that he was a most imposing

figure, especially as he wore fierce moustaches and eyebrows—of a horse-hair-like texture, it is true, but most effective.

“ Ha ! ” shouted this magnificent creature, halting in the middle of the stage, and fixing his eyes upon some as yet unseen object behind the scenes. “ He still defies me ! He still wants to wed her ! But it shall never be ! I—I will prevent it. Hist ! what is that ? What do I see ? Begone—horrible vision ! ” He shivered, and drew more closely up to his neck a little cloak which depended in a purposeless manner from his left shoulder, and which looked very like a familiar fur tippet of Kitty’s.

The object of his terror, after some delay, became apparent. A figure clad all in orthodox white glided on to the stage, one shaking hand pointed towards the unhappy Frederic, whose teeth chattered audibly.

“ Beware ! ” observed the ghostly visitant, in a choked kind of voice suggestive of smothered laughter. “ Cruel murderer, behold your victim—a dweller in the nether gloom ! Again I say—beware ! ”

The spectre then slowly retired backwards, and had almost disappeared, when his (or its) foot caught in its trailing drapery, and behold ! it fell flat on its back on the floor, revealing a very prosiac pair of boots and a round face crimson with laughter. At this little incident Frederic was heard to mutter,

"Just like you!"

Upon which the spectre gathered itself up and retired. Frederic staggered wildly about the stage for a few minutes, exclaiming,

"Tis he! Tis the ghost of my murdered cousin Alphonso! Ha! he is gone. I breathe again."

Here his moustache suddenly fell off; but with laudable presence of mind he picked it up and replaced it, calmly licking the back of it first, as though it had been a postage stamp. Then he folded his arms, and seemed lost in gloomy thought, from which he was aroused by the entrance of a jaunty figure in a white flannel cricketing-suit, and a blue paper helmet with a long white feather waving gaily therefrom.

The newcomer (who, it transpired, was Frederic's friend Gilbert) slapped that meditative warrior jocosely on the back, exclaiming in a festive kind of way which evidently ill accorded with his friend's humour,—

"Well, my friend—how goes it with thee?"

"Peace!" said Frederic with a ferocious glare. "Peace! Know that this is no time for jests. Is't true that to-morrow thou weddest the fair Gulnare?"

"Right you are," acquiesced the gay and light-hearted Gilbert. Then hastily correcting himself, "I mean, it is indeed so, oh Frederic. Hast any objection?"

"I have!" was the disconcerting reply. "I would make her *my* bride! Give up thy claim—or die!"

"Never!" shouted the amazed and justly-indignant bridegroom elect.

"Then fight for thy love like a man!" returned Frederic between his teeth, at the same time tearing off his cloak, and raising on high an old fencing foil.

Gilbert also laboriously unfastened from his belt a similar weapon; and then a deadly and blood-thirsty fight ensued, which resulted in the death, with many squirms and groans, of the unfortunate Gilbert. Whereupon the spectre appeared, executing singularly uncouth gambols; Frederic fell down in a swoon; and the curtain was convulsively pulled together by the minions. The audience were much impressed by this thrilling scene, with the exception of Miss Scrope, who was heard to exclaim fretfully,

"But what is it all about? I can't make out a word they say. Oh, it's a silly thing. Miss Kitty might sing us something."

Kitty, however, was playing the Wedding March; and when it was finished, the curtain was pulled back, and on reference to the programmes it was found that the scene represented the interior of Frederic's "baronial hall." A clergyman, with a long white surplice (very like an ordinary nightshirt) was waiting, with Surenne's French Dictionary in his hand, to marry the fierce Frederic to the lovely Gulnare—the latter represented by Blinks, giggling wildly, and clad in a white lace gown of

Kitty's. Over her head she wore a muslin antimacassar which did duty for a veil. As the ceremony was about to begin, the bridegroom was heard to mutter in a wrathful undertone,

"Stop that giggling, Blinks—you ought to be crying!"

"Silence!" put in the clergyman impressively. "Do you Frederic take this woman Gulnare—" But here an interruption occurred in the shape of the spectre Alphonso, who entered to wailing music, and with a great want of manners, placed himself between the bride and bridegroom. From this vantage-ground he said, "Ha!" in a low and terrible voice; then, folding his arms, he grinned at the paralysed Frederic in such a blood-curdling way that it was no wonder that guilty individual fell senseless to the ground. The unfeeling Gulnare, I regret to say, went on giggling; and it was only after sundry pokes and frowns from the ghostly visitant that she remembered her part sufficiently to throw up her arms and shriek,

"Saved! Saved!" After which she immediately fainted also.

The clergyman closed his book and departed; while the spectre, with a wild war-whoop, danced a kind of hornpipe round the prostrate forms of the bride and bridegroom. The minions rushed in, the spectre disappeared, and the curtain again "fell."

ACT III. discovered Frederic on a bed of sickness,

attended by a faithful nurse (Kitty), and haunted at intervals by the spectre, (who appeared to have a good deal of spare time on his hands). In the midst of the sick man's ravings the male minion entered (in red flannel tights, which unaccountable change of costume convulsed both Kitty and the audience) bearing a letter, which he handed to Frederic, who, apparently forgetting his delirium, read it (aloud, of course) with every appearance of convalescence. It was from Gilbert, it appeared, mentioning that he had not been killed, only severely wounded, and that he was now on his way to claim his bride. Frederic sat up in bed, and issued a stern command that the Lady Gulnare should be immured in his deepest dungeon until his (Frederic's) recovery. The minion bowed and retired. The curtains were again drawn, but refused to come quite close, and the sick man was seen to jump out of bed, and drag it across the stage.

Much scraping and bumping went on before the curtain "rose" on ACT IV., which represented the "Kittywake's Cave by moonlight, guarded by lions." This required a good deal of imagination, the cave being simply an enormous washing-tub set on end, and draped in heavy shawls and rugs. The stage was unlit save by one candle, which, perched on a high bracket behind a round piece of pale-blue paper in a bamboo frame, was supposed to represent the moon. In the background

loomed a confused mass of what looked like tables, chairs, chests of drawers, &c., but which on reference to the programmes, were found to be steep cliffs and promontories. The lions were nothing more nor less than Major, and a canine friend of similar breed and appearance, the property of Freddy Turner.

When a few moments had been allowed for the enthusiasm of the audience to subside (Kitty meanwhile playing "Oft in the Stilly Night") the shawls at the mouth of the cave were pushed aside—after two energetic whispers of, "Now! Now!" from the wings—and a tiny white-robed figure, with fluffy golden hair and dancing eyes appeared behind the lions, and screamed excitedly,

"I'm twite ready!"

Then, in obedience to another admonition from the wings, she laid before each "lion" a piece of bread with the solemn and unexpected remark,

"Poison—to kill you dead!"

The lions, however, having blandly snuffed at the "poison," calmly but firmly ignored it, in spite of Gulnare's whispered assurance,

"Eat it up, Major dear; it's not *real* poison!"

At this moment Gilbert appeared, wrapped in a long cloak, and wearing a shady hat much pulled down at one side.

"Beauteous Gulnare," he said in a loud whisper, dropping on one knee, "are the lions dead?"

"Ess," was the answer with a beaming smile.

"Hast given them the poisoned carrion?"

"Ess—but they *wouldn't* take it."

"Then come—let us fly," interrupted the impatient lover.

Gulnare skipped out; but the lions—thinking, probably, that a walk was in prospect—jumped up, barked, wagged their tails, and "went on" generally in a most unlionlike manner.

"Lie down!" commanded Gilbert in a furious undertone.

The kings of the forest obeyed, sneaking back to their former positions, indeed, with their kingly tails between their legs. Whereupon Gilbert took his lady love in his arms, and began to steadily climb the dangerous cliffs before mentioned. The Lady Gulnare appeared to be highly excited, and shrieked out,

"Uncle John!—Dick!—look at Baby May!"

"Hush!" said her lover, giving her a palpable squeeze; upon which she threw her little arms round his neck, and shamelessly kissed him, to the unbounded delight of the "house."

"Be quiet, Baby May, or I'll let you fall," gasped her breathless bridegroom reprovingly, as he continued his perilous ascent.

This was the grand effect of the piece; for the said ascent was performed under the mystic radiance of the

magnesium light. Indeed, a coil of magnesium wire, presented to the talented dramatist by Freddy Turner, had suggested the whole plot of the play.

Higher and higher climbed the bold and intrepid Gilbert, while his delighted bride bounced about in a most unladylike way, and kept nodding and kissing her hand to the audience over her lover's shoulder. Just as he reached the second highest chair—I mean cliff—a hoarse voice called out,

"Hold!"

And the half-convalescent Frederic, supported by minions, and with an elaborately floured face to suggest ghastly pallor (which it certainly did), staggered upon the stage.

Gilbert paused.

"Who dares to interrupt my flight?" he inquired in a voice which, though haughty, indicated that the speaker was rather out of breath.

"I do!" returned the other. "Unhand that maiden!"

"Never!" was the spirited reply. "Ere to-morrow's sun she shall be my bride!"

"Give me my pistols," gasped the furious Frederic to the minions, who immediately produced two not very alarming-looking weapons, which their master immediately levelled at Gilbert.

"Wouldst shoot an unarmed man?" scornfully demanded the latter gentleman.

Frederic's reply was an immediate discharge of both weapons, whereupon Gilbert was apparently shot in the right arm. He dropped his fair burden (who clung to his leg affectionately), and shouted,

"Coward!"

"Hast had enough?" was the haughty inquiry from below.

Upon which the outraged lover threw himself into an elegant attitude, and in a long speech (plainly cribbed from a well-known poem) informed his enemy that the rock should fly from its firm base as soon as he—that though his right arm was broken, he would fight until his latest breath with his left, and a good deal more to the same effect. Then with a wild "Ha, ha!" he disengaged himself from his lady love, and lowered her to a position of safety, pretty near the ground; threw off his cloak (thus disclosing a princely suit of crimson flannel profusely ornamented with gold stars), leapt from a chest of drawers—I mean a huge boulder—to his adversary's very feet, and hissed between his teeth,

"Revenge! Revenge!"

The minions (who seemed to carry a small armoury about with them) produced swords; and Frederic, with a scornful laugh, bade Gilbert take his choice. The latter, however, intimated that it was a matter of indifference to him, and carelessly thrusting the hand belonging to his broken arm into his pocket (at which

feat Uncle John laughed immoderately), took one of the swords in his left hand, and stood "on guard."

The minions retired, and a furious battle began. The Lady Gulnare, meanwhile, with a callous indifference to the fate of her two war-like admirers very sad to see, was frivously leaning over the "cliff," calling in a subdued voice and endearing terms to Oliver Twist, who had strolled unto the stage, and was now rousing the lions to wrath by surreptitiously biting their tails. As the heroes, however, were both engrossed in slaughter, they did not observe this undignified behaviour on the part of the maid they both adored. A crimson light—skilfully manipulated behind the scenes by Master Turner—now surrounded the combatants, who fought fiercely but silently, while Kitty played a wild Tarentelle. Frederic, in spite of his recent illness, appeared to be gaining a steady advantage, and finally pierced Gilbert through the shoulder. The latter sank on one knee with a most realistic cry, which caused Lady Gulnare to burst into dismayed tears—real tears—and clambering down the cliffs, to embrace as much of her wounded hero as she could get at, in a way which impeded his movements very much indeed. From this vantage ground she shrilly denounced Frederic as a "naughty, cruel boy;" and was finally torn away, shrieking and struggling, by the female minion.

All at once a shadowy form appeared, and laid a

firm and most unshadowy grasp on Frederic's "sword" arm, causing him to make the most wildly erratic thrusts at his enemy, and finally to run himself through the body. After a few convulsive staggers he fell to the ground, where after a long speech, he expired, and one of the lions came and licked his face. Here the moon abruptly fell down—happily extinguishing itself in its fall. But the crimson light before mentioned, fully supplied the office of the fallen luminary, and it was ignominiously kicked aside by the spectre, who solemnly joined the hands of the Lady Gulnare and the victorious Gilbert; then, placing his foot upon the neck of his defunct cousin, raised his hand and said in a sepulchral voice,

"Avenged!"

Then, in a blaze of blue fire (also manipulated by Freddy) the curtain "fell."

"Author! Author!" cried Uncle John, who had laughed until he could hardly see.

Upon which Frederic, looking very warm, but modestly triumphant, "came on," bowed, and retired. Gilbert, both the Ladies Gulnare, and the ghostly Alphonso were then called, and at Mr. Lester's suggestion, the "orchestra." Finally Dick led a call for the "illuminator" and the female minion.

Altogether "The Phantom Avenger" was evidently a dramatic success, though Miss Scrope was heard to

say that it was "great nonsense." But the most successful plays are liable to censure from some saturnine critic, and our author, like a sensible young man, merely observed with a contemptuous smile,

"Pooh! who cares!"

The entertainment ended by the youngest Lady Gulnare performing a *pas de seul* to the air of "Old Dan Tucker," much to her audience's satisfaction, and evidently to her own also. Her tongue, I regret to say, took a prominent part in the performance. She was so excited by the tumultuous applause that followed that she could hardly subdue herself sufficiently to go through her "drill." Baby May's drill (which I should have described before—perhaps I did?) was an almost nightly exercise, organized and conducted by Ted, who put the funny little recruit (armed with a walking-stick for a musket) through all the various exercises of a military novice, followed invariably by Major, who thought the whole thing rather silly, but felt it his duty, as one of the family, to countenance it. It was pretty to see Baby May solemnly grasping her musket and obeying with laborious pains Ted's peremptory orders to "shoulder arms," "port arms," &c., &c. The little creature went through the whole performance with a deadly earnestness, underlain by a curious chuckling importance very comical to see. When it was over Ted said "Dismiss!" in a stern voice; but until he said so,

the small soldier stood stiffly grasping her musket in an attitude of uncompromising "attention," her baby-lips pressed tightly together, her big blue eyes fixed with military precision on vacancy. Indeed on one occasion, the young officer had rushed off at a moment's notice to inspect some rabbits, and left faithful Baby May standing at "attention" in a corner of the tool-house, where she was discovered by Kitty half-an-hour later weeping desolately, but still clinging to her "arms."

To-night, however, she was in such exuberant spirits that instead of waiting to be "dismissed," as usual, she dropped her musket, and rolled over and over, across the room and out at the door like a little hedgehog, screaming with laughter, which finally changed to hysterical weeping—partly because she had bitten her tongue severely, but principally because, owing to the lateness of the hour, she was not allowed to sit up for supper.

CHAPTER XI.

TED.

“Up, up, my friend, and clear your looks,
Why all this toil and trouble?”

TED RUTHVEN was a fine, manly lad ; but he was headstrong, and had a curious, mule-like pleasure in doing the things he ought not to do, and leaving undone the things he ought to do. And between good-hearted if injudicious Uncle John and high-spirited Ted there was a long-standing though unspoken feud.

It had occurred to Ted of late that there were more exciting pleasures to be got out of existence than “doing lessons,” and mooning about in the country. So two days after Christmas he informed his uncle that he desired to go to Eton, thence to Sandhurst, and finally to enter some crack cavalry regiment. He had long entertained a secret desire to follow his father’s profession, and saw no reason why he should not do so. A faint twinkle shone in Uncle John’s eyes at his nephew’s nonchalant announcement ; then it died away, and he

surveyed the boy in silence for a second or two, thinking how like his dead father he looked, as he stood there with his handsome little head thrown well back, his brown eyes flashing with excitement, and one foot advanced slightly before the other.

"I don't get on with Lester," Ted continued ; "he doesn't give me anything worth learning ; and he's a muff besides. So if you please, Uncle John, I should like to go to Eton after the holidays."

Uncle John laid his hat and stick down on the table. He had been going out, but at Ted's request had turned into the library.

"My good boy," he said, adjusting his gold eyeglasses carefully," did it never occur to you that you will have to work for your living?"

Ted drew himself up proudly.

"I understood that we all had money of our own, sir," he said flushing scarlet.

Uncle John smiled slightly.

"You will all have, when you come of age, a little money of your own, certainly. But it is very little, and taken separately is not worth considering. Your share is of course only an eighth. So I imagine you may put Eton, Sandhurst, and the army out of your head for ever."

"You mean I can't be a soldier—ever ?" exclaimed the boy with a defiant air.

"Exactly."

Ted's mouth grew stubborn.

"And what do you mean me to do, then?" he asked in an insolent tone.

"Time enough to consider that when your studies are over," said Mr. Dornton, calmly paring his nails as he spoke, in a way supremely exasperating to his nephew's soul. "I may be able to get you a situation in a bank, or in my factory."

"What!" burst out the boy fiercely, "do you suppose I'm going to spend my days sitting writing on a stool, or ordering about dirty work-people—like any ordinary cad? Do you suppose my father's son—" Here he stopped, choked with indignation.

Uncle John was smiling grimly.

"My good lad," he said, "if your father's sons are above earning their bread, it's a poor look-out for you all. And if you think you are going to be launched into an expensive cavalry regiment, sir," continued Uncle John, lashing himself into a passion, "and live at the rate of a few thousands a year on credit, and very likely come to grief in the end, instead of working to make an honest living, you are—you are making a deuce of a mistake, sir! I have paid for your education hitherto—for the education of the whole of you; and when I've done that, I think I've done very well!"

"It's like you!" shouted Ted furiously, forgetting himself altogether—"it's like you! throwing benefits in

a fellow's face! It just shows the cad you are! As for that beggarly Lester, I detest him." His discourse was interrupted by his uncle seizing him by the shoulders, and marshalling him towards the door.

"Now look here, young man!" he said sternly, "you've been allowed to run wild too long! That style of language must not be used to me. Go to your room, sir, and remain there until you can behave like a gentleman."

"I'll do a great deal less!" returned Ted insolently, sinking the embryo cavalry officer in the enraged schoolboy. "You can order your work-people about as you like, but, by George, you won't order *me!*"

But in the twinkling of an eye Uncle John had him by the collar, and seizing his walking-stick, administered a very vigorous and well-directed thrashing.

"Now, sir!" he said, releasing him with a final cut, "perhaps you will remember who you are talking to another time!"

Ted stood quite still for a moment or two, his face flushed to a dull red, which faded slowly away, leaving him curiously white.

"You old *beast!*" he panted. "How *dare* you strike a gentleman's son! I'll make you sorry for it, see if I don't—you low, cotton-spinning *cad!*"

With which gentlemanly remarks he rushed from the

room, banging the door after him with such violence that the very windows shook.

Uncle John—naturally—was in a furious passion, and rushing after his plain-spoken nephew, he caught him when he was half-way upstairs, and boxed his ears soundly.

"You young dog, sir—you deserve to be thrashed within an inch of your life! Apologize at once, or—or I tell you it will be the worse for you!"

"Apologize? I'll see you shot first!" was the furious answer.

Whereupon Uncle John, without more ado, dragged the outraged hero, struggling and kicking to his room, and locked the door, after which he went downstairs to consult his sister-in-law and Dick as to what was to be done with that "unruly young cub" Edward Ruthven.

The latter young gentleman having spent an hour in his own room—in occupations which will be explained later—calmly climbed out of the window on to the top of an adjoining outhouse, and thence to the ground. Then he boldly walked in at the front-door, and made his way to the library.

Dick was alone. He was lying quite still, with his teeth pressed down on his underlip, his eyebrows contracted, and his thin, nervous fingers tightly clenched—with him unmistakeable signs of almost unbearable pain.

But Ted was too much engaged with his own affairs just then to pay much attention to anyone else's.

"I say, Dick!" he burst out, "I want to speak to you!"

"Well, old fellow," was the faint answer.

"Has Uncle John told you that he and I have had a row?" proceeded Ted loftily.

"Yes—he has just left me."

"Well—and don't you think I was quite right?"

"I have heard Uncle John's version. I should like to hear yours."

Ted, nothing loath, launched into a slightly embroidered account of the interview already described.

"Now—don't you think he was in the wrong?" he demanded.

"No, Ted, I don't. I think you were in the wrong."

"What—you take his part?" indignantly.

"I don't take anyone's part. I have heard your statement, and his. And to say the least of it—even from your own account—I don't think you have behaved as a gentleman."

Ted looked both amazed and incredulous; then he burst out,

"I say, Dick, you don't understand, surely! *No* fellow would have stood being spoken to in the caddish way he spoke to me! Besides, he struck me—the old *beast*!"
(This last word very savagely.)

"You want to be a soldier, don't you?" said Dick, when he had listened to a fresh storm of vituperation against Mr. Dornton.

"Yes, I do. And, by George, I mean to be one!"

"Do you know what a soldier's first duty is?" went on Dick, his quiet even tones in curious contrast to the broken passionate voice of his young cousin.

Ted tightened his mouth, and was silent.

Dick continued,

"Until a man has learned obedience to his superior officer, he is no good as a soldier."

"I daresay!" interrupted the boy hotly, "but Uncle John isn't my superior officer."

"Your Uncle John is your guardian, and a very fine old fellow."

"A cotton-spinner and an officer are two very different things," mumbled the future defender of his country.

"My dear boy, it is quite possible for a cotton-spinner to be in every way a gentleman. And I have met officers—not many, I grant you—who were anything but gentlemen. As for your Uncle John, you may go a long way and not find a better specimen of an honourable true-hearted gentleman than he is. He was in the right to-day—entirely; and when your passion has cooled, you will allow that he was. And I think you owe him an apology."

Dick spoke in a very low voice, and with long,

painful pauses between the words. Ted felt uncomfortable, but only said sullenly,

"I'll see him far enough first. *He* ought to apologize; he insulted me."

Dick did not answer for a minute. His teeth were pressed hard upon his underlip; he was breathing quickly and unevenly. Then he said briefly,

"I am disappointed in you, Ted."

"Well, I can't help it," was the dogged answer. "I daresay it's easy enough for you to lie there, and have everything your own way, and nothing to bother you; but if you'd been suddenly told that a thing had been knocked on the head that you'd been thinking of, and—and looking forward to for ever so long—" Here a most unmartial though manfully-repressed sob choked Ted's voice, and plunging his hands into the pockets of his knickerbockers he walked to the window; then throwing up his head defiantly, he began to whistle.

A curious smile curved Dick's pale lips for a second; then a fierce paroxysm of cruel physical agony took possession of him, and rendered him oblivious of all save endurance.

Presently the whistling ceased, and there was a long silence, broken at last by a low inarticulate moan from the sofa. The sound startled Ted, and made him turn round.

"I say, Dick," he exclaimed hurriedly—"what is it? Are you worse? Shall I ring for Atkins?"

But Dick was past speaking. His ghastly face, his closed eyes, and the strange way in which his underlip was drawn back from his teeth, terrified his young cousin beyond expression. He rang the bell furiously, and rushed down the corridor shouting for Atkins, who soon made his appearance hoping savagely and loudly as he saw Ted, that the latter had not been "up to any of his larks."

"Oh shut up, you old fool!" exclaimed Ted with an indignant glare. "Do you think it's likely?"

"Oh, as likely as not," was the uncompromising reply; "I wouldn't put it past ye." And the speaker hustled "Master Ted" unceremoniously out of his way.

Ted went upstairs very slowly, and sat in the gathering dusk for a long time. Roy and Joe were out skating, so no one disturbed him. He felt out of humour with everybody—himself most of all. For one thing he couldn't get Dick's face out of his mind. And with a sudden unwonted tightening at his heart he remembered his own words. He had said that it was very easy for Dick to lie there, and have everything his own way. Poor Dick! Ted would have given anything to recall these words. They seemed to him now nothing less than *brutal!*

He got up, and walked about irresolutely.

"I'll wait till to-morrow," he muttered.

Then he slowly unpacked various articles from a small

battered leather bag, and pushed the bag itself as far under one of the beds as it would go.

Hardly had he done this than there was a tap at the door. It was Kitty.

"Can I come in, Ted?"

"Yes," very gruffly.

CHAPTER XII.

TED LEARNS A SOLDIER'S FIRST LESSON.

"Wait : yet I do not tell you
The hour you long for now
Will not come with its radiance vanished
And a shadow upon its brow.
Yet far through the misty future,
With a crown of starry light
An hour of joy you know not
Is winging her silent flight."

KITTY came in softly, and closed the door. She carried a little tray, which held a cup of tea, four slices of bread and strawberry jam, two baked biscuits, and a wedge of gingerbread. She set the tray down on a chair, and lighted a candle.

Ted tried to show a martial superiority to the viands supplied ; nevertheless he was conscious of feeling exceedingly hungry. Kitty's face was very grave ; and this unwonted spectacle caused Ted to say hastily,

"I say Kits, how is Dick ? "

"He is very ill," said Kitty in a voice that shook a little. "He has been in terrible pain all day, but about an

hour ago it got to be something awful. Even Atkins says he never saw him so bad. Dr. Bell is here; he has just come. Oh poor, poor Dick, it is frightful to think how he suffers."

"I made him worse!" said Ted shortly, staring at the candle. "I got out of the window after Uncle John locked me in here, and went down to Dick, and talked away about my own things like an ass, and never noticed that he was as white as a sheet—It's just like me!"

Kitty put her arm round his shoulders, and kissed him; but he, mortally afraid he was going to cry, wriggled away.

"I don't think your talking to him would make any difference, Teddy," said Kitty tenderly. "You know he likes to have us tell him things."

"Yes, but you don't know what I was brute enough to say," burst out Ted excitedly. "We were talking about Uncle John thrashing me, and all that; and Dick said I ought to apologize, and I said I wouldn't, and that it was all very easy for him to lie there and talk to people—and that he didn't know what it was to give up a thing when you'd been thinking of it all your life—and all the time he was lying there in tearing pain—and had had to give up going about, and hunting, and riding, and he'd think—he'd think—" Here Ted *was* guilty of an unruly sob or two—and small shame to him.

Kitty patted the rough head soothingly.

"Dick wouldn't think anything, except that *you* hadn't thought," whispered Kitty in the quaint little consoling way that endeared her to all the boys' hearts. "You know how he always understands things."

Ted gave her a sudden bear-like hug.

"You are an old brick, Kits," he said in a muffled voice. "Being engaged hasn't made you a bit different."

And this sincere if inelegant tribute to her sisterly qualities pleased Kitty more than the finest speech could have done.

After this, hunger conquered sentiment, and Ted, having rubbed the humiliating marks of tears from his face with an exceedingly dirty pocket-handkerchief, applied himself to his tea.

Kitty sat on the bed and watched him.

"Poor Dick," she said, half to herself, "he has had to give up a good deal. You know, Ted, he was engaged to be married.

"No?" said Ted incredulously, pausing in his attack on the wedge of gingerbread.

"Yes, he was ; but when the girl knew he would be a cripple for life, she broke off the engagement."

"Oh well, I daresay old Dick's all the better without her," observed Ted prosaically, to whose feelings this grief did not appeal. "I don't see what people want to get married for at all, if you ask me. I say Kitty, can a fellow have any more tea?"

Kitty undertook to procure some.

When she had been gone some time a noise in the corridor proclaimed the arrival of the skaters.

"Hallo, Ted! What's up!" exclaimed Roy. "Got into a row?"

Ted gruffly explained.

"I say, you fellows," he added, "don't make such a thundering din. Dick's awfully ill."

The other two quieted down at once. Then they went off in the wake of Kitty, who had just brought up a fresh cup of tea, and also another large piece of gingerbread.

Shortly afterwards the door handle rattled noisily, and a small voice cried,

"Let Baby May in?"

Ted opened the door, and that young person entered and climbed upon a box, where she sat with folded hands, and little fat legs hanging down.

"I've come to see you," she answered cheerfully.

Ted went on with his tea in silence.

"Do you like having your tea up here?" inquired the small visitor, when she had disposed of a piece of her host's gingerbread.

"Not much," was the brief reply.

Baby May gazed at the ceiling.

"Once Baby May had tea in bed because she was naughty," she observed pensively. Then as this remark met with no response she added,

"Very likely *you've* been naughty. Have you?"

"No. Boys are never naughty—only little girls," was the gratifying reply.

"Baby May is a *dood* girl," said that young lady in gravely reproving tones.

"Well, you run away downstairs if you're a good girl, or else hold your tongue."

"Did Uncle John whip you very hard?" was the next disconcerting inquiry.

"Baby May!" said the exasperated young man, "do you want to be whipped, and put outside the door?"

"No," replied Baby May promptly.

"Well then, you just be quiet, and don't ask silly questions, or you'll be bundled out in less than no time."

But this quencher had no effect whatever upon Baby May.

"Uncle John says you are a young *scamp*!" she announced after a pause, bringing out the last word with gleeful triumph.

"I'll scamp him," muttered Ted wrathfully.

"It's naughty to be a scamp!" went on the small female moralist with a funny air of solemnity. "Baby May's not one!"

"Baby May's a little nuisance, and that's worse."

"No, it isn't," said Baby May flatly. Then descending suddenly from ethics to the realms of commonplace she added, "Baby May wants more gingerbread."

When this was devoured, she sucked each little finger deliberately, and then climbed down off the box.

"Are you going to tell Uncle John you're sorry?" she asked then very gravely.

Ted's answer to this was to open the door, and deposit the youngest Miss Ruthven upon the door-mat.

* * * *

The next day Dick was a great deal better, though very white and weak; and in the morning he sent a message by Nancie to Ted, asking him to go to the library. As the latter had not seen fit to beg Uncle John's pardon, he was still a prisoner. However, he received permission to leave his room for the purpose of obeying Dick's summons.

No one was present at the interview; and at the end of half-an-hour Ted came out with a very red face, and went straight to Uncle John, who was reading his newspaper at the dining-room window. The latter looked up sharply as the boy entered the room.

"What now, sir?" he exclaimed in a stern voice. "I thought I——"

But Ted interrupted him.

"I say, Uncle John, I was sorry I was rude to you yesterday. I didn't behave like a gentleman, and—and I hope you'll look over it." Ted got out all this in a great hurry, and with his eyes fixed upon the carpet.

"All right, my boy," answered Uncle John heartily. "No man, or boy either, can do more than apologize. Let bygones be bygones. And we'll have no more nonsense about soldiering in the meantime. You stick to your lessons, my boy—that's all you've got to do for the next few years. Now, be off! I want to finish my paper."

But Ted lingered, crimson and awkward.

"I want to tell you," he blurted out, "that I'd made up my mind to run away last night and enlist. And I had a bag packed and everything. If it hadn't been that I felt I couldn't go till I knew Dick was better—I'd have been off by this time."

"Ah!" said Uncle John gravely. "Well—you thought better of it—eh?"

"Yes. Dick says no gentleman would do it—at least not in that sneaky kind of way, and," with a dubious air, "I daresay being a private is different to being an officer."

"It is—a little," observed Uncle John drily. "Well, well," he added—"glad you've the sense to see you were wrong. Now be off, and shut the door after you."

Away went Ted, tore his skates out of the hat-stand, and ten minutes later was skimming along the frozen river, with a few choice spirits as gay and light-hearted as himself.

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. CHARTERIS.

"The blank amaze of your haughty gaze,
The cold surprise of patrician eyes."

GLOOM rested on the house of Ruthven, as far as the boys were concerned.

'He' was coming.

"He" was Mr. Charteris. Kitty had had a letter saying he would visit Ruthven Court during the following week. Kitty thought it probable he would stay for a fortnight, or perhaps longer.

The boys thought the projected visit promised to be just fourteen days too long. It was now the end of February; the frost had gone, and some of the days were almost warm. Uncle John had gone long ago.

Naturally Kitty was desirous that her family should appear to the best advantage before her lover; and during the few days that had to elapse before Mr. Charteris's arrival, she made the boys' lives a burden to them, by imploring them to be on their good behaviour during his stay, and not what she called "impish." She

also coaxed Aunt Prue to have dinner at six instead of two, as she knew "Gerald" could not bear early dinners.

At last the day arrived. "William of Orange," harnessed to a time-worn dog-cart, conveyed old James to the station to bring home the expected guest and his luggage. The boys, one and all, had absolutely refused to go to meet their future brother-in-law, so old James went alone.

Nearly an hour afterwards the dog-cart was seen returning ; and from a secluded spot behind the laurels the boys watched the arrival. A gentleman was seated beside old James on the front seat ; he was smoking, but threw away his cigar as they neared the house. His face the boys could not see, as it was turned in the opposite direction. Kitty, Agatha, and Aunt Prue were on the doorstep ; the little girls were invisible, and so (as we know) were the boys. Old James pulled up, and Mr. Charteris descended. He was rather tall, but slightly made ; he had good features, cold blue eyes, and a very effective moustache of the same colour as his hair, which was light brown. He wore an eyeglass, and spoke with a languid drawl.

The horrified boys exchanged glances of speechless dismay and disgust.

"He's a *swell!* " they ejaculated simultaneously under their breath.

And if they had said, "He's a pick pocket!"

they could not have infused more sovereign contempt into their tone. Was *this* the creature who was to take away their Kitty? This languid, dandified, supercilious swell? Their boyish souls rose in fierce revolt and resentment. *They* wouldn't go in to welcome him—not they! *They* weren't going to pretend they were glad to see him! So they went off on some expedition of their own ; and when Kitty came to look for them, were *non est*.

Mr. Charteris's doom was sealed.

The Masters Ruthven returned about five minutes to dinner-time and rushed to the library "as they were," not even taking time to wash their hands—which wanted washing badly. The whole family were assembled there ; Aunt Prue in her new black velvet gown ; all the girls, large and small, in their Sunday frocks ; and Mr. Charteris in faultless evening attire—blissfully unconscious of the effect he thus produced upon his future brothers-in-law.

Kitty introduced these young savages, and Mr. Charteris surveyed them through his eyeglass with much curiosity, and little admiration.

"Ah—delighted, I'm sure," he said in his languid voice. He did not offer to shake hands (in which to be sure, he was wise ; for the three pairs of hands in question were filthy, as I have hinted). Then he resumed his conversation with Aunt Prue, who gently suggested that the new-comers should perform their

ablutions before going into the dining-room. They sullenly departed, muttering audibly that "dinner at tea-time was beastly ;" and the others went in to dinner without them.

In the seclusion of their room the boys yelled derisively at the idea of "that fellow" (as they disrespectfully called the visitor), "dressing himself up as if he was going to a party."

"It just shows what an idiot he must be," scornfully observed Ted, as he dipped his face into the basin.

"Whatever Kitty can see in the fellow, I don't know," supplemented Roy, wielding the hair-brush fiercely. "A fellow who wears a glass in one eye ! Ugh ! It's sickening !"

"I say," suggested Joe, "let's make it so hot for him that he'll be glad enough to get himself out of the place—and then perhaps he'll quarrel with Kitty, and she won't marry him, and everything'll be jolly all round, just like it used to be !"

This praiseworthy and hospitable idea was received with acclamations and applause ; and the three conspirators went down to dinner, where they behaved rather worse than usual, with a view to showing their visitor that they weren't in the habit of dining at this hour, and didn't like it. Nancie and Blinks, too, were in a giggling and unruly frame of mind ; and Baby May was blandly and unquenchably conversational.

"Why are we having dinner instead of tea?" this small busybody asked curiously, regardless of frowns from Kitty and Agatha. "And oh, Nancie! We've got the best plates! Is it because that gemplum's here?"

The "gemplum" must have been edified by the manners of his future relatives; for Blinks was immediately afterwards heard to say in an awed whisper,

"Fruit and pudding both on the table at once! We never have *that*, you know, Nancie!"

Nancie, however, was engaged in a fierce though silent tussle with Joe for possession of a book which she (as was her habit at meal-times) held concealed upon her lap to be perused at intervals, and which Joe had confiscated.

"I say, Aunt Prue," cried the latter, "is Nancie to read at meal-times?"

"Nancie and Joe," exclaimed Agatha sharply, "behave yourselves properly, or else leave the room."

"Observe Agatha showing off before company," jeered Ted in an exasperating way.

Meanwhile Joe was swiftly and dexterously peppering Nancie's hair, the result of which was that she burst into a mingled paroxysm of sneezing and sobbing.

Aunt Prue, who was trying to engage Mr. Charteris in polite conversation, turned to administer a mild rebuke to the delinquents, and said apologetically,

"I'm afraid you will find us a sadly undisciplined family, Mr. Charteris."

But before he had time to answer, Baby May, who had been surveying the visitor for some time in silence, observed in an audible voice,

"Why has he only got one 'pectacle on, Nancie?"

Mr. Charteris looked amused ; and disregarding the rude giggles around him, condescended to enter into conversation with this *enfant terrible*, who, nothing loth, became quite friendly.

"How long are you going to stay?" she inquired gravely, after a time.

Charteris smiled and pulled his moustache.

"I haven't thought about it yet," he answered, with equal gravity.

"Roy hopes you'll go away soon," continued Baby May blandly.

"Does he?" said Mr. Charteris, totally unmoved, as he turned his eyeglass languidly upon that somewhat disconcerted young gentleman. "Why?"

Roy, muttering some unintelligible impertinence, took an enormous gulp of water, and immediately choked.

"Oh *isn't* he a naughty boy?" said Baby May, with a severely moral air. Then fixing her round blue eyes upon Charteris she inquired suddenly, "Why have you got such a big shirt on?"

Charteris actually blushed ; and Kitty laughed wildly. Happily, dinner was at an end by this time, so any further remarks upon the guest's garments and general appearance were spared him.

There was a fire in the drawing-room to-night, and thither all the family repaired, except the boys, who trooped into the library, to get rid of their bottled-up indignation to Dick, who, however, to their enraged disappointment, said he thought Mr. Charteris didn't seem at all a bad fellow ; and said further, that most men dressed as he did in the evening if they dined late, and in fact that he (Dick) had always done so until his accident.

"I say, Dick, you don't mean to say you're going to take his part instead of ours?" exclaimed an indignant chorus.

"My dear lads," said Dick smiling. "I don't see the necessity for taking either your part or his. You surely don't mean to render any such course necessary?"

"We don't want him to marry Kitty," muttered Roy, rebelliously.

"I don't suppose that matters," was the quiet answer, "if Kitty wants to marry him. And I'm sure you have all too much gentlemanly feeling to make things otherwise than pleasant for him while he is your guest."

"He isn't our guest," objected Joe. "We never asked him."

Dick took up his book again.

"If you are going to stay here, boys, I wish you would shut the door," he said coldly.

Dick was impracticable when his face wore the look it

did now ; and the boys, feeling that their last friend had deserted them, departed sullenly, and spent the rest of the evening in teaching the long-suffering Major to walk laboriously across the schoolroom, holding a stick between his paw and his chest, which performance made him feel a very degraded dog indeed. Searching for rats—even imaginary rats—was a pastime he could understand, and one that never palled upon him ; but the use of this tomfoolery was beyond him.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE RUTHVENS AT THEIR WORST.

"He writhed—then sternly manned his heart
To play his hard, but destined part!"

Scott.

IT was late on the afternoon of the next day, and Kitty, with an imploring face, was haranguing the boys, who, distinctly mutinous, were lying about on the schoolroom hearthrug, inciting Oliver Twist and Major to deadly combat.

"If you would just make your hands and nails look nice, dear boys," she pleaded; "and put on clean collars, and wear your Sunday suits—just at dinner-time. It makes *such* a difference, and it's only for a little while. Gerald won't be here so very long."

"Thank goodness," interpolated Roy.

"And," continued Kitty artfully, "you are such nice-looking boys when you are clean. I am sure——"

"Oh, I daresay—that'll do, madam Kitty!" a chorus of derisive voices interrupted her. "You won't come round us *that* way."

"If our clothes are good enough for Dick, they're good enough for Charteris," observed Ted ill-naturedly. "He's a stuck-up conceited beast—that's what he is. If anyone had told me you would think of leaving us for a fellow like that, I would not have believed it."

Kitty looked angry, which did not happen often where the boys were concerned ; and rising hastily, she went out of the room. Really, the boys were too bad for anything, she thought with pardonable resentment. So she was much surprised when, shortly before dinner, all three met her in the hall, and flinging themselves upon her affectionately, said, speaking all at once,

"Look here, Kits—we're going to do as you said, and get ourselves up for dinner."

"That's dear boys," she answered hurriedly. "Be quick then."

The boys were late, however ; but as this was nothing unusual, dinner began without them. Aunt Prue had helped everybody to soup, when the door opened, and—

Who were these who solemnly entered one by one and took the three vacant places? Three figures who at first seemed strange and unknown, but who upon inspection resolved themselves into Roy, Ted, and Joe.

Aunt Prue and Agatha laid down their spoons in horrified amazement; Kitty flushed an indignant crimson; Nancie and Blinks burst into subdued laughter;

while Baby May jumped up and down on her seat, and pointed at her brothers in childish glee not at all subdued.

The appearance of these young gentlemen was certainly curious in a very marked degree. Their jackets and waistcoats were folded back with laborious care, thus revealing a sufficient space of shirt-front to travesty their future relative's irreproachable evening dress. Each boy held in his right eye (with evident effort) an oval piece of glass—extracted, apparently, from ordinary spectacles, and pierced with a small hole, through which was passed a piece of thin twine. On each boy's upper lip, too, a ferocious black moustache was corked. Anything funnier than this get-up, in conjunction with the homely knickerbockers and woollen stockings which encased these young reprobates' lower limbs, could hardly be imagined ; and this effect was enhanced by the air of bland self-complacency which pervaded their round boyish faces, and general mien.

Kitty glanced at her lover, who was nonchalantly addressing himself to his dinner ; and then she said in a low voice, not unsuggestive of possible tears,

“ Boys !—leave the room, and dress yourselves properly at once !”

“ I daresay ! ” was the jeering reply. “ Leave the room yourself.”

Aunt Prue looked at the delinquents (who were

gobbling their soup in unseemly haste), and said in a worried kind of way,

“Boys! what is the meaning of this folly? Go and wash your faces at once, and button your jackets.”

“We did it to please Kitty,” remonstrated Joe in an injured voice. “She asked us to.”

“*Joe!*” burst out Kitty furiously. “How dare you tell such a wicked untruth? It’s *too* bad of you!”

But Joe was occupied in fishing his eyeglass out of his soup-plate, and only chuckled naughtily.

Aunt Prue raised her eyebrows in helpless resignation.

“I’m sure I don’t know what Mr. Charteris must think of you,” she said.

Mr. Charteris, however, after the first calm and brief survey of the three grotesque beings who sat opposite to him, had taken no further notice of them. This was galling to the souls of his young kinsmen-to-be; and they relapsed into sullen resentment, which made them look more absurd than before. But at Aunt Prue’s last remark Charteris turned his eyeglass in their direction, and said with exasperating serenity,

“Some little Christy Minstrel entertainment, I presume?” Then he resumed some discussion he had been holding with Kitty, and which the boys’ entrance had interrupted.

Now we all know that there is nothing more maddening to the British schoolboy than to have his practical

jokes passed over in unmoved calm by the object of them ; and from this night the boys only lived in the effort to make Mr. Charteris's life a burden to him. Joe once or twice indulged in the time-worn trick of lying flat on his face on the doormat at the visitor's bedroom door, in the vain hope that that gentleman, emerging hastily, might fall over him. The latter, however, only stepped over Joe's recumbent body in a leisurely way,—on the last occasion of the kind observing carelessly,

" Hallo, Joe ! What's the matter ? Got stomach-ache ? "

This was humiliating ; and Joe gave up that game.

Some days later, however, he set his wits to work again. For his age, he was a remarkably clever caricaturist ; and in something under half-an-hour he had produced, on a large sheet of white drawing-paper, an unmistakable though ludicrously-exaggerated portrait of Mr. Charteris, under which flourished the inscription,

" Common or garden swell—largest size ! "

This exquisite production was placed across Mr. Charteris's looking-glass, after being duly admired by the artist's brothers.

It so happened, however, that Kitty's lover was also a good caricaturist, and possessed a keen sense of humour besides. So that when the boys went up to bed, the first thing that met their eyes was the sheet of drawing-paper reversed, fastened above their wash-stand, and

bearing an equally unmistakable, though even more highly-caricatured portrait of Joe, with the inscription,

"Common or garden cad—smallest size!" Much to Joe's discomfiture, and his brothers' rude amusement.

* * * * *

Next day was wet; and the boys, who had been twice turned out of the kitchen by the indignant Sarah, had devoted themselves to teasing Nancie. Dick had a bad headache, and was not to be disturbed.

By lunch-time the boys' spirits were boisterously high; and Kitty trembled, as she took her seat at the table. She felt sure her lover must think her brothers shockingly ill-bred; and really since his arrival they had seemed to grow more and more outrageous. As a matter of fact, Charteris privately wondered if the whole family, with the exception of Kitty, were slightly mad. Certainly they behaved as if they were.

To-day the sole dish at lunch, except rice-pudding, was a large rabbit-pie. Kitty had made the pie, as it was Sarah's washing-day; and it looked very nice indeed—until it was cut, when a decidedly "gamey" odour, so to speak, struck cold terror to poor Kitty's soul. For there was nothing else in the larder to-day except cold mutton (until the local butcher should bring the dinner); and Kitty had a presentiment that her lover did not like cold mutton. Aunt Prue helped the

pie of course, and as she afterwards said, hoped its short-comings in the way of freshness might not be noticed.

They might not have been. Mr. Charteris attacked his portion manfully, though not without inward qualms. He was very fond of game—*as game*; but naturally he did not regard rabbits in that light.

Kitty and Agatha telegraphed an awful look at each other, and ate sparingly and in silence. But soon all concealment was at an end.

"This is a very remarkable production, my dear Kitty," said Roy, with an exact imitation of Charteris's voice and manner—"very remarkable! It tastes exactly like—and it smells exactly like—By the way, who has seen Oliver Twist lately?"

"She is lost!" said Blinks, ready to weep. "She's been lost ever since the day before yesterday."

"Ah! that accounts for it," said wicked Roy sadly, as he laid down his knife and fork with deliberate care. "Kitty—my *dear* Kitty—if you had told me that you were about to offer up our poor Oliver as a sacrifice to our London visitor, I could have given you a stray cat, whom no one would have missed or mourned. You will forgive our sister, sir," he added to the disgusted Charteris. "She is apt at times to be so economical that—that we—er—have to put a check upon her. But she means well. In this case, however, I fear that she has outdone herself."

Whereupon Ted chimed in reproachfully,
“ Restrain your appetite, Blinks, my child! You are satisfying your hunger at the expense of——ah! poor poor Oliver!”

Blinks, who had been winking very fast, now burst into tears; and Roy resumed, with exaggerated gentleness (totally regardless of the loud and excited remonstrances of his aunt and elder sisters),

“ Do not weep, dear Blinks. You should be glad to think that our little Oliver has died a glorious death, so to speak, and has not lived in vain,—*and* has not ended her days as a sausage, as might have been the case. She is fatter than I thought,” he went on reflectively, inspecting with care the piece of meat upon his fork, “ her little ribs are absolutely fleshy !”

Now, Charteris was fastidious, not only about his food, but about any remarks thereupon whilst he was eating it. Of course he did not really think that the remains of the lost Oliver were enshrined in the enormous pie at the head of the table; but, as I have hinted, the thing really was unacceptable to more senses than one; and this he had been conscious of in disapproving silence for some time. He turned somewhat pale; and with an expression impossible to describe, laid down his knife and fork, and leaned back in his chair. As for poor Kitty, she burst into angry tears.

“ Aunt Prue ! ” she exclaimed passionately. “ Why do you allow them to act so ? ”

Whereupon Roy, Ted, and Joe, digging their knuckles into their eyes in imitation of the grief-stricken Blinks, (who was still lamenting the unhappy Oliver) yelled, and shrieked, and simulated tragic woe, until the noise—mingled with Blinks' howls, Kitty's sobs, Agatha's shrill protests, and poor scandalized Aunt Prue's vain attempts to enforce order—was positively deafening.

Charteris, who was becoming accustomed to the singular behaviour of the junior Ruthvens, and who was feeling rather faint besides, still remained leaning back in his chair.

If he had consulted his own inclinations, he would have beat a hasty retreat ; but he felt that his lady-love would feel that more than anything ; so he sat still, mentally calculating how long his pretty gentle Kitty would have to remain among these young savages before he might claim her as his own.

Aunt Prue, meanwhile, left the room to see if the larder afforded any further promise of luncheon save the cold mutton ; for all now felt that the pie was quite impossible.

All at once Blinks, goaded to madness by Ted's insulting gibes, viciously stuck a fork into that young gentleman's arm, upon which he, stamping with pain and rage, boxed her ears smartly. Agatha tore them asunder ; while Joe laughed until he fell under the table, dragging his plate after him.

Blinks sobbed and shrieked ; for Ted's blow had been a hard one.

Charteris rose with a muttered exclamation, seized Master Ted by the arm, and, to use a homely expression, "cuffed his ears soundly."

" You young coward—to strike a girl!" he said with indignant scorn in his usually quiet voice.

Crimson with rage, Ted precipitated himself upon the foe, striking out in good earnest. And poor Kitty sat down and cried as if her heart would break.

What *could* Gerald think of them all ?

In the midst of the fray the lost Oliver walked in by the open window, and—no one paying any attention to her or the table—began a hearty meal upon the maligned pie. Joe, becoming suddenly aware of the wanderer's presence, emptied the contents of the water-jug over her, thus causing her to make a hurried exit, spitting and snarling, by the way she had come, followed by Blinks uttering tearful cries of relief and joy. Roy tore after them, and missing his footing, measured all his length in the moist brown mould of the now empty flower-plots which stretched under the window.

Charteris, who could be energetic enough when he chose, pitched the other two boys unceremoniously after him, and shut down the window ; then he strove to console the weeping Kitty.

In a few minutes Aunt Prue returned, followed by

Ellen bearing the cold mutton and attendant vegetables.

The boys, much to the surprise of Kitty and Charteris as well, did not re-appear, surmising, doubtless, that the latter was not in a mood to be trifled with. Besides, they did not care about facing the pie again, and were unaware of any supplement to the meal. So they made a raid upon the pantry, where they confiscated a loaf, a knife, and a pot of jam. Having thus fortified exhausted nature until dinner-time should arrive, they retired to the tool-house to concoct fresh diabolisms.

"You'll see I'll make that great haw-haw brute sorry he dared to cuff *me!*!" muttered the outraged Ted, as he scooped out the remaining contents of the jam-pot.

At this moment Baby May appeared, breathless with the information that Major had "caughted a prickly ball at the foot of the kitchen-garden!"

On inspection the prickly ball turned out to be a hedgehog; and— But more of this anon.

Dinner-time arrived in due course. Kitty, with a view of making up to her lover for his meagre luncheon, had made a delicious little *quenelle* of some kind for his special delectation at dinner. (Joe, who found her deep in its concoction, stigmatized his future brother-in-law as a "greedy beast," who was always thinking of eating.)

This was a distinct libel on Charteris; but which of us

is just to our enemies? Well, Kitty finished her cooking; and having left special instructions that the delicacy in question should be placed before Mr. Charteris himself at dinner, she ran away to make herself look pretty by donning a little black lace frock—in which I may say she was eminently successful.

Ellen was both cook and housemaid that day; so after she had brought in the various dishes, the family had to wait upon themselves. Just as Ellen was crossing the hall with the covered dish containing Kitty's *quenelle*, Joe and Ted met her.

"I say, Ellen!" exclaimed the latter, "there's a spider crawling up your back!"

Ellen uttered a smothered scream, and almost dropped the dish she carried—which was however providentially rescued by Joe.

"Come into the pantry, and I'll take it off for you," said Ted obligingly to the shuddering Ellen, who had a mortal dread of spiders.

An imaginary spider having been caught, killed, and put out of sight, Ellen thanked "Master Ted" profusely, and returning to the hall, took the dish from Joe, who with wonderful patience, was standing where they had left him. Then both boys demurely entered the dining-room, and seated themselves at the table.

Ellen plumped the dish down before Mr. Charteris, and made a speedy exit, forgetting to take off the cover. For the spider still haunted her.

"Allow me!" said Charteris in his usual courteous, even tones, to Kitty, who was next him.

He lifted the cover as he spoke ; and——

Heavens ! *what* were those pinkly dreadful little objects which proceeded to wander aimlessly towards the horrified young man !

The question was speedily solved : for Baby May, who had already seen the creatures, and promised "not to tell," now basely betrayed her trust by clapping her tiny hands and shrieking delightedly,

"Baby hedgehogs !—Baby hedgehogs !"

An exclamation of the most intense and inexpressible disgust broke from the hitherto speechless Charteris ; and pushing his chair violently backward, he rose and hurriedly left the room.

For a few moments there was an awful silence, broken presently by subdued chuckles from the boys.

Everyone else seemed too shocked for utterance. All at once Kitty, who had been sitting dumb with fury, flew from her chair, and rushing round to her brothers, who were stretching themselves across the table to catch their hideous little *protégés*, she slapped their heads and faces until her hands tingled again ; then, with a final passionate shake to Joe, she whirled out of the room before they had time to recover from their enraged astonishment, and was seen no more that night.

Aunt Prue of course, was exceedingly angry. And much the delinquents cared !

The only verdict they dreaded was Dick's. And though he said nothing about it when they went into the library to bid him good-night, they felt that he knew, and that he was angry. For Dick had a dreadful way of treating the boys with a cold ceremonious politeness when he was seriously displeased with them that somehow always impressed them more than anyone else's most violent scoldings.

CHAPTER XV.

CHARTERIS IN A NEW CHARACTER, AND DICK IN AN OLD ONE.

"There was a little stubborn dame,
Whom no authority could tame ;
Restive by long indulgence grown,
No will she minded but her own !"

"One sees that this antagonistic temper must be much relieved by finding a particular object ; and that its worst moments must be those where the mood is that of vague resistance, there being nothing specific to oppose."—*George Eliot.*

ON the following day Kitty was in the schoolroom, looking over and correcting the boys' exercises before Mr. Lester should see them—which was as well. She had nearly finished, when the door opened and her lover entered. It was the first time she had seen him alone since the dreadful episode of last night ; and she rose at once and laid down her pencil.

"Gerald," she said, crimsoning painfully. "I *hope* you don't think I knew anything of that horrible trick of the boys—for indeed, *indeed* I didn't. And *please*

forgive them, dear. They are really loving, kind boys ; but I think they are angry because you are—are going to take me away—and that is what makes them so dreadful. You will forgive them, dear Gerald—won't you ? "

Gerald put his arm round her, and kissed her sweet wistful eyes.

" My dear child," he said, " I daresay my forgiveness won't materially affect the young demons. But upon my word, Kitty, someone ought to take them in hand. You know—er—seriously, they want wheeling into line." And Charteris pulled his moustache savagely.

Kitty sighed and was silent.

" It was awfully rude of me to leave the table as I did, last night," Charteris added after a pause. " But—er—I was feeling rather upset to begin with, and—er—these little beasts—I am not alluding to your brothers—just finished me."

" Oh, it was sickening," shuddered Kitty—" simply *sickening!* Don't let us speak of it any more."

" Come for a walk," suggested Gerald, looking at his watch ; " we shall just have time before lunch."

" Very well. I shan't be long putting on my things," she answered. " You can have a cigar here until I come back."

However it was some little time before Kitty came back ; for Ellen had cut her finger, and had to have it

bound up ; and Aunt Prue wanted a little note written.

While Charteris waited, dreamily smoking his cigar, Baby May wandered into the schoolroom, tear-stained and fractious ; for Nancie was in a temper, and utterly unapproachable, and her little satellite was therefore desolate. In one hand she clutched her doll, Josina, a melancholy-looking personage with unkempt hair, staring black eyes, and curiously-arranged legs and arms ; in the other hand was crumpled a confused mass of small heterogeneous garments.

She walked up to Charteris, who was lazily stretched out on the tattered old sofa.

" Well, little one," he said, pulling one of her curls good-humouredly.

" Put on my dolly's clothes !" demanded the newcomer, briefly and rudely, holding out the garments in question.

" Thanks, no, little atom," was the equally brief answer.

" Must—*must* !" shrieked the atom, jumping up and down with sudden rage.

Charteris meekly tried to explain that doll-dressing was beyond him.

Baby May, becoming more and more excited, insisted.

" But look here, little girl," he remonstrated mildly but firmly, " I *can't*, and that's all about it."

But when Baby May's rage evaporated in tears, which rolled down her cheeks in swift and mournful procession, Charteris—who was really a good-natured fellow—relented, and lifting his long legs from the sofa, sat up, and gingerly took hold of Josina, whose anatomy filled him with wonder and awe. Having removed his cigar from his lips to facilitate operations, he dubiously took hold of what he correctly supposed to be the doll's frock.

But Baby May pulled it away.

"Wrong one—wrong one!" she said fretfully.

"Well—which is it?" asked Charteris with a resigned air.

Baby May held out a small cotton garment which had once been white, and Charteris, feeling somewhat indelicate, enveloped the Eve-like Josina with all speed.

Josina's mamma, who never lost her sunny temper for long, now became quite gracious, and climbed upon her victim's knee to make suggestions.

"Josina's my baby!" she observed, as Charteris struggled with a refractory knot in that young lady's elementary garment. "Have you got any babies?"

"No," he answered gravely, after a short pause, during which Josina slipped to the floor, and was unceremoniously hauled up by one leg.

"Would you like one?" inquired the small inquisitor.

"I think not," answered Charteris, after due deliberation ; "at least not just now."

"But you would like one with a nice face like Josina, wouldn't you?" said Baby May reproachfully.

"No, not with a face like Josina, I think," objected Charteris, eyeing that young person's staring eyes, aggressive cheeks, and frowsy hair with decided disfavour.

"Well—who like? Like—like Kitty?"

Charteris laughed a little.

"I think Kitty is prettier than Josina, certainly—don't you?"

Baby May hesitated ; then she clutched her beloved doll to her motherly little heart.

"Baby May loves Josina!" she said loyally.

Charteris resumed his cigar again, and leaned back with an air of exhaustion. But Baby May immediately thrust Josina and her next garment into his unwilling hand.

"Oh I say! are these to go on?" he said with a dismayed face. "I don't know how. You finish dressing her ; and I—er—I'll look on, don't you know—eh?"

"No—you!" was the stern and uncompromising answer. Then she added with cruel irony, "Take your 'pectacle out of your eye, and then you can see."

Charteris passed this insult over in silence ; he had now arrived at an embarrassing stage of Miss Josina's

toilette, and was painfully endeavouring to introduce a comparatively large button into a very small button-hole.

Baby May looked on with interest ; then she resumed, “ How many babies would you like ? ”

“ One would be enough to begin with, wouldn’t it ? ” was the languid answer. The button-hole business was becoming exhausting.

“ I’ve got three,” proceeded Baby May reflectively.

“ Ah,” was the absent answer. “ Oh, *hang* this thing ! ” he muttered *sotto voce*.

“ I’ll give you one of my old babies for your very own—one wif the eyes poked out,” was Miss Ruthven’s next magnanimous remark. “ Would you like one ? ” she added earnestly, as Charteris did not jump at this tempting offer.

“ I think I like them best with eyes,” he observed, conquering the button difficulty with a sigh of mingled relief and triumph. “ Now, what comes next ? ”

“ Flannel pettitoat,” was the calm reply.

“ Where is it ? ” inquired the victim, removing his cigar to look about.

“ Don’t know,” said this nonchalant little mamma.

“ Oh, well—let’s never mind it,” said Charteris, once more seizing the frock.

“ No,” said Baby May with firmness ; “ must have on flannel pettitoat ! ”

So absorbed were they in their search for this necessary garment that neither heard the door open to admit Aunt Prue, Agatha, and Kitty.

"He's puttin' on my dolly's clothes," said Baby May in a business way, while Charteris still grasped the partially-clothed Josina, who now presented the appearance of a Turkish lady.

Aunt Prue actually blushed; while Kitty went off into a gale of merriment.

"Come, Baby May," said Aunt Prue, "I want to try on your new frock. No indeed, Kitty, you shall not wait for your walk any longer. I insist upon your going."

Agatha did not offer to stay in; she was putting some things in a basket, for some old woman who lived in the village. (She was not a very grateful old woman, and had been heard to wish that Miss Ruthven "wouldn't come botherin' in at all hours. And as for comforts—thank the Lord, between her son Jem and the Vicar she was kept well supplied." Agatha, however, did not know this, and continued her visits as usual.) But this is by the way. To return.

With a sigh Baby May got off Charteris's knee, and was borne off by Aunt Prue, Charteris having thankfully resigned Josina. Just as she reached the door she ran back again, screaming,

"He's dot my dolly's flannel pettitoat!"

And sure enough there was the wretched garment in question dangling from the amateur nursemaid's sleeve-link. He handed it over with a considerable accession of colour ; and Kitty and he went for their long-delayed walk.

* * * * *

"I say, Agatha, just hem these sails for a fellow—I can't find Kitty anywhere," shouted Roy clamorously, a quarter of an hour later, as Agatha passed through the hall equipped with a cloak and basket for district visiting.

"Oh, I can't, Roy dear—not just now. I'm going to read to a poor little sick boy in the village, and then I'm going to old Mrs. Willox's."

"Oh, *hang* poor little sick boys and old women!" muttered Roy. "There I've promised Fred Turner to sail my yacht against his down the river—and now I can't. It's a low shame of you, Agatha. It wouldn't take more than a few minutes."

But Agatha hurried away, unheeding ; and Roy, still muttering, turned and nearly fell over Nancie, who had found her temper, and felt humbly repentant.

"Roy—do you think I could hem the sails?" she said awkwardly ; for Nancie was a novice in proffering favours.

"You? No. A nice mess *you'd* make of them," was

the scornful answer. "I wonder where on earth Kitty is?"

"You are a rude, thankless boy," exclaimed poor Nancie, her eyes smarting with indignant tears.

But Roy flung himself away.

"Kitty's out walking with Charteris," said Ted, who had just slid down the bannisters. "Ask Aunt Prue."

"Pooh! Aunt Prue can no more hem a sail than she can climb a tree," replied Roy contemptuously. "If Kitty's out walking with that fool, there's no saying when she'll be back. Why on earth couldn't he have taken a fancy to Agatha? We could easily have spared her. And she's the eldest, she ought to be married first," he concluded in an injured way.

"She isn't as pretty," remarked Ted wisely. "Fellows like their wives to be pretty. If ever I get married, you bet I'll have a pretty girl."

"If ever you get married!" echoed Roy with an insulting laugh; (for his temper was ruffled, and he would have quarrelled, so to speak, with a feather). "That's a good joke!"

"I don't see it!" returned Ted hotly. "I bet I'll be married as soon as you will!"

"I bet you'll be nothing of the kind," answered Roy, for no earthly reason except purposes of aggravation. "So don't you make a fool of yourself."

Ted laughed in a peculiarly aggravating way; and

Roy immediately delivered a well-directed "back-hander," which caught his brother neatly on the nose. Ted promptly returned it ; but he just missed Roy, and hit instead the trim little schooner which the latter still held under his arm—knocking it to the ground, damaging the masts, and seriously defacing the smart little figure-head upon which flourished her name, the "Larkspur."

For a moment Roy stood in speechless rage and grief ; then, with a furious exclamation, he struck Ted with his doubled fist straight between the eyes.

Down went Ted, for the attack was unexpected ; but he was up again in a twinkling, and returned the blow with interest. Roy backed into the schoolroom ; and then, I am sorry to say, a regular fight began.

A few minutes later, Nancie and Blinks, attracted by the scuffling, found both boys rolling over and over on the schoolroom floor—kicking, hitting and struggling—while Major barked wildly round them both, evidently regarding the whole thing as a good joke.

The noses of both combatants were bleeding freely, at which dread sight Blinks flew breathless to the library, where Dick was lying alone, looking out at the early spring sunshine, and wondering gloomily why he had not been killed outright on that terrible day nine months ago, instead of lingering on, an idle useless log, to "cumber the ground" indefinitely.

"Oh Dick!" almost shrieked Blinks, abruptly

breaking in upon his reverie, "Roy and Ted are killing each other. Their faces are covered with blood!"

Dick made a half-involuntary effort to rise. Poor fellow! at times he almost forgot his utter helplessness.

"Where are they?" he asked.

"In the schoolroom."

"Atkins," said Dick to that worthy, who had just entered, "ask Master Roy and Master Ted to come here to me. Tell them I want to see them particularly."

Atkins departed; and sounds of wild altercation were presently audible.

A few moments later Atkins returned, dragging the boys after him. Their struggles availed them nothing; for Atkins was more than a match for them. Nevertheless he appeared slightly out of breath. Nancie, (who had been vainly trying to "make them stop,") followed, pale and terrified. Dick, however, peremptorily dismissed her.

Atkins gave the enraged combatants a severe and somewhat vindictive shaking, before he released them.

'You may go, Atkins,' said his master quietly. "I told you to *ask* the young gentlemen to come here—not to bring them."

Atkins, somewhat abashed, retired.

The boys glared at each other for a few seconds in panting silence; then, as their eyes met their cousin's, they both began to look somewhat uncomfortable.

There was a curious expression in Dick's eyes as they rested upon the two angry boyish faces ; not exactly amazement, and not exactly disgust, and not exactly calm inquiry, and yet an odd mingling of all three. Certainly both boys were sorry-looking objects. Dick wisely ignored this, however, beyond saying in his usual voice,

" You had better go into my room, and wash your face, Roy. When you come back Ted can go. Ted, just put some coal on the fire, will you ? "

Ted obeyed, somewhat sullenly ; and Roy trailed into the inner room in the peculiarly dilatory way schoolboys affect when in a bad temper. In a short time he returned, with a face guiltless of gore indeed, but otherwise of a decidedly disreputable appearance. When Ted, too, was comparatively cleansed, Dick said gravely,

" I must apologize to you, boys, for Atkins' misinterpretation of my wishes. I merely asked him to tell you that I particularly wished to see you. Of course I know if he had given my message properly you would have come at once."

This treating them as men and equals soothed the boys' dignity amazingly. They had expected a sharp reprimand ; and had been sullenly prepared to resent it with spirit, and even impertinence, if necessary. But Dick knew better.

They wriggled about uneasily for about a minute,

wondering if Dick's next remark would be about their bruised and swelled faces. He did not allude to these palpable facts, however, and rose twenty per cent more in their estimation because of it.

Then truthful Roy blurted out,

"Ted and me were having a jolly row, and pummelling each other like blazes when you sent for us. Atkins gave us your message all right—but we were too mad to come."

Ted, with his hands in his pockets, was sulkily swinging himself to and fro on his toes and heels, with a most forbidding expression of countenance. The sensation one's nose experiences during the process of enlargement after a series of well-directed blows is far from pleasant, and Ted, just then, was acutely conscious of the fact.

"Ah!" said Dick pleasantly, "I didn't use to object to a good fight myself when I was a youngster—but I don't know that it's quite the thing between brothers—eh? What was the row about?"

"Oh nothing much," growled Ted. "His schooner fell—and he said my arm jogged it—"

"So it did," put in Roy savagely.

"Well—I couldn't help it."

"Yes, you could—you tried it. Besides, you were giving cheek by the yard—"

"I wasn't. You began it. You tried to make a fool of me—"

Here a faint sense of the outrageous absurdity of the dispute which had preceded the mishap to the "Larkspur" came over Ted, and he giggled awkwardly.

So, after a short struggle, did Roy.

"That's right, boys," said Dick smiling too. "Life's too short for rows. What's the damage to the "Larkspur?"

"Masts broken—and figurehead smashed," was the gruff answer from her owner.

"Go and bring her, there's a good fellow, and let's overhaul her," said Dick, raising himself ever so slightly. "I'm rather a good hand at that sort of thing—at least, I used to be."

Roy departed ; and presently returned bearing the ill-fated vessel.

"Ah," observed Dick, knitting his brows, "that's a pity. We must see if we can't patch up the figurehead. The masts will be easily put right. And we'll get Nancie to hem the sails."

"She can't," said Roy shortly.

"Oh yes, she can. She hemmed two pocket-handkerchiefs for me, beautifully. Where's Joe?"

"Up in the apple-tree—playing his fiddle."

"Well, ask him to lend me his paint-box, in the first place."

"Oh, I know where it is. Up in our room. I'll get it," said Ted, touching his injured nose gingerly.

"Ask him first," was the authoritative answer. "I object to my own things being borrowed without permission."

Ted departed.

"She's smashed," said Roy, disconsolately. "It's no good."

"You leave her to me," was his cousin's confident answer. "By the way, old fellow, as your face seems to have suffered least, will you ride into Kelby for me, and get a bottle of medicine made up?"

"All right," acquiesced the boy with alacrity; for he felt more like a good gallop than anything else just then.

"Atkins will give you the bottle and the prescription. And if you see Nancie, just tell her I want her."

Away went Roy; and in less than no time he was putting "William of Orange" along the road to Kelby at a pace which caused the villagers to shake their heads and prophesy that "them young Ruthvens would come to an awful end some day—see if they didn't!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A HEAVY TROUBLE.

"In comforting others shalt thou be comforted ; in strengthening others shalt thou find strength ; in loving others shalt thou be loved."

* * * * *

Two days later Charteris took his departure, promising to come back again in the early summer, or perhaps sooner. Kitty privately shed a few tears in her own room, and then came out with pink eyelids to read Little Red Riding Hood to Baby May, who had been fractious and peevish ever since she got up in the morning. She (Baby May) cried when the boys teased her, instead of laughing as usual ; and complained that her legs were tired, and that her head ached.

It was now tea-time (the boys had clamorously insisted on the late dinner being abandoned now that "he" was gone ; and Aunt Prue and the girls, nothing loth, had consented). Baby May was crosser than ever, refused to eat her bread and milk, declaring it was "nasty ;" and finally amazed her family by slapping Nancie,

while the latter was untying her "feeder," because, as she wailed dismally, "Nancie had pulled her hair on purpose."

"The child's eyes look heavy," said Aunt Prue anxiously. "And her head and hands are burning. I hope she isn't going to be ill."

"Oh no—not goin' to be ill!" wept Baby May dolefully

Then she was carried off to bed by Nancie—her little head drooping and heavy—too tired even to kiss her hand as usual to the boys.

But as Nancie reached the door, Baby May struggled down, and ran up to Ted.

"Never did drill," she said in a tired, cross little voice.

"Oh, you're too sleepy to-night, Baby May," said Ted.

"No—not too sleepy!" she said fretfully, stamping her little foot, and beginning to whimper.

Ted got the walking-stick, and the melancholy little recruit, followed by the faithful Major, (who privately considered this entertainment slow to a degree, as he was not even allowed one bark) "shouldered arms," etc., in a weak and spiritless way very unlike her usual brisk and laughing performance. And when Ted suddenly said "Dismiss!" she started, tripped over Major, and burst into tears. Major licked her face

sympathetically ; and Nancie picked her up, and carried her away.

Next morning it was quite evident, as Aunt Prue said, "that the child was sickening for something," and Dr. Bell was sent for immediately after breakfast. And when he came Aunt Prue's fears were realized. For Baby May had scarlet fever.

There had been several cases in the village lately ; and upon inquiry, it turned out that the little boy whom Agatha had been visiting daily for the last week, was just recovering from scarlet fever.

Poor Agatha ! she suffered tortures of remorse ; for the boys were brutally frank on the matter, and even Aunt Prue was almost stern. Dick was more gentle to her than any of the others were ; but even he, she could see, blamed her unreservedly. She never forgot a certain conversation she had with him one afternoon when Baby May had been ill about a week. Agatha cried herself to sleep that night. She felt so bewildered, and confused, and miserable. She had meant to do so well, to be so far above the average modern young lady ; and no one—not even Dick—seemed to appreciate her.

In the morning, however, she comforted herself by thinking that perhaps it might be a "mild case." But alas ! it was not a mild case. Dr. Bell looked grave and anxious, and came every day, and sometimes twice a

day. Even the boys looked scared and subdued ; and a heavy cloud seemed to hang over the whole household.

Dear little Baby May ! How they missed her gleeful childish voice, her tiny pattering footsteps, and her laughing baby face with its dancing golden curls !

Aunt Prue, Agatha, and Kitty took turns in sitting up with her. All three nursed her. She knew none of them, though, and tossed and cried on her little bed day and night.

The pitiful childish eyes, and hoarse, changed little voice, almost broke their hearts to see and hear.

Nancie and Blinks were banished to a distant room ; for neither had had scarlet fever. Nancie rebelled sorely at this ; and often spent hours at night, when all the household was still, crouched at the door of the sick-room, listening with aching despair to the beloved little voice moaning, " Nancie—Nancie—come to Baby May. Oh, do you not love your baby, Nancie ! "

One night Nancie, after restlessly tossing about beside the sleeping Blinks until her head ached almost as much as her poor little heart, crept out of bed, and as usual ran swiftly and noiselessly along to the door of the room where the sick child lay. It was long past midnight, and the household, except those who watched in the sick-room, had retired to rest long ago. All was silent within the room. Ah ! was Baby May dead, then ? At the thought Nancie's heart almost stopped beating.

How loudly and slowly the clock downstairs was ticking ! It seemed to Nancie's excited fancy to say, "Quite dead !—quite dead !—quite dead !"

At last she could bear it no longer, and opening the door with shaking fingers, went slowly in, and stole towards the inner room.

It was Agatha's turn to sit beside the little patient. She was sitting in a big easy-chair near the head of the bed ; but she did not stir as Nancie approached, for she had fallen asleep. Aunt Prue was lying down in the other room ; and Kitty had gone downstairs to get something Ellen had forgotten to bring up.

Nancie crept closer to the bed, almost holding her breath ; and just then Baby May moved her head slightly.

In another instant, in a passion of thankfulness, Nancie sprang upon the bed, clasping her little sister in her arms, pressing feverish kisses on the flushed cheeks and bright hair, and sobbing bitterly though silently.

But Baby May did not know her Nancie. She had been in an uneasy doze ; but now she awoke, und kept moaning and rolling her little head backwards and forwards on the pillow.

"Nancie—Nancie," she wailed piteously, "come to Baby May."

"I am here, darling," whispered Nancie, holding her closer still. "See—it is your own Nancie."

At this moment Agatha opened her eyes and sprang from her chair.

"Nancie!—you naughty wicked girl!" she exclaimed indignantly. "How dare you come in here? Go away directly!"

"No, I won't!" was the obstinate though tearful answer. "Not for you nor anybody else! So there!"

But Agatha, without more ado, dragged her off the bed towards the door.

"You let me alone!" shrieked Nancie, amid hysterical sobs. "I *won't* go, I tell you!—I *won't*! She'll die—I know she will—and none of you love her as I do! Let me go, I tell you—I hate you! It was all your fault—and if she does die, *you* will have killed her!" And then, in a perfect fury, she seized Agatha's plump arm with her strong white teeth, and bit it—bit it as hard as ever she knew how!

Agatha shrieked with the pain; and her shriek brought Kitty and Aunt Prue, terrified and breathless, into the room.

Aunt Prue took Nancie by the hand, and led her from the room, saying gently,

"Nancie, do you want to make poor Baby May worse? Do you know how ill she is?—and the doctor said we must keep her very, very quiet. Surely you did not awaken her when she was asleep?"

And yet she pitied the poor child—knowing how

deep was her love for her little sister—and quite forgot to scold her for biting Agatha. She led her back to the room where Blinks lay soundly sleeping, and lifted her into bed. But Nancie clung to her, sobbing wildly.

"Oh Aunt Prue! is she going to die? Don't let her—don't let her! I heard the doctor say that—that—"

Here she stopped, choked with sobs.

Aunt Prue began to cry too.

"Hush, dear, hush!" she said unsteadily. "God knows best."

Then she covered Nancie up with the bedclothes, and went softly away.

Blinks, disturbed by Nancie's crying, woke up and put her arms round her, murmuring sleepy, consoling words; but Nancie was too miserable to be grateful for sympathy, and pulled herself sullenly away. Blinks soon went to sleep again; and Nancie crawled out of bed, and knelt, shivering in her little white nightgown, at the window.

It was a lovely night; and as the child looked up at the great silver moon smiling coldly down on the trees and gardens, she wondered drearily if it were possible that God could be so cruel as to take away sweet little Baby May, who had been in this beautiful world so short a time, and who had never done a single wicked thing in all her tiny life. Nancie wished passionately

that *she* might die instead. Ah, Nancie!—thousands have wished that wish before you! To die instead of our dearest ones! Which of us would not choose it—gladly?

How still the house was! The clock downstairs ticked on. It seemed to say, its voice grown fainter through the shut door,

“No hope! No hope!”

Nancie tried to pray; but a dreadful feeling came over her that God was too far away to care; and she rose from her knees with a sobbing sigh. No one cared, she thought bitterly—not as she did. Except Dick.

Ah, yes! Dick cared—Dick would understand.

She had a confused idea that he would be sure to know some way to save Baby May. At least he would be sure to comfort her. And a sudden passionate longing for that comfort *now*—to-night—took possession of her. Perhaps he was not asleep.

“I will go down and see,” she murmured restlessly.
“If he is, I can come away again.”

In a moment she slipped into her little dressing-gown, and was soon stealing softly downstairs. The moonlight fell in ghostly patches on the broad shallow steps of the staircase. The clock ticked more loudly than ever. Something soft and cold touched her hand, making her start violently. It was only Major, wagging his tail and looking up at her with his honest brown

eyes shining through his shaggy hair. Nancie stooped to pat him, and passed on—across the hall, and along the corridor. She passed Atkins' room on tiptoe; for he was a light sleeper, and as a rule, the slightest sound awoke him. And he always left his door a little way open.

The library door was also ajar; so was the door of Dick's bedroom. The dim light from the lowered lamp which always burned all night in the inner room, streamed in a little pale streak across the library floor.

Nancie listened. All was silent. A deep feeling of disappointment came over her—a feeling which she knew was selfish—with the knowledge that Dick was evidently asleep. She vaguely dreaded going back again up those dark ghostly stairs. And hark!—what was that stirring in the corner by the window? It was only Oliver Twist, turning round in her sleep; but Nancie's heart jumped to her throat.

Just then she heard Dick cough, and move slightly. She went quickly to the bedroom door, and pushed it a little further open. As she did so the handle rattled noisily, and Dick turned his head.

"Why, Nancie!" he said, in a surprised voice, as he beheld the forlorn trembling little figure. "Why, Nancie!"

She ran towards him, and seizing his hand, began to sob silently.

"My child, what is the matter?" he said tenderly.
"Is it about Baby May? Is she worse?"

"Oh yes, Dick. She is dying—I know it, I know it. And they won't let me be with her—and she is crying for me—she wants me. But they don't care—nobody cares but you—not even God. Oh Dick, Dick—what shall I do? Speak to them, and tell them I must be beside her. Oh Dick, *do* speak to them!"

"My dear little one," said Dick in his deep gentle voice, "it would be very wrong to run the risk of your taking the fever too. You—"

But Nancie started up with a quick, sudden cry.

"Dick—I went into her room—I kissed her, and took her in my arms—to-night—just now. And now perhaps I have given the fever to you. Oh forgive me—forgive me! I didn't know—I never thought!"

"My Nancie," answered Dick reassuringly, drawing her towards him as he spoke, "I had scarlet fever years ago—so don't let that trouble you. But we mustn't have you laid up, you know. I hope you haven't taken cold coming down these draughty stairs with your bare feet. You must go back to bed like a good little girl."

"Oh Dick, I can't sleep! I have a dreadful feeling when I go to bed that perhaps in the morning Baby May will be *dead*, and never speak to me again." And she buried her face in Dick's pillow, her whole body shaking with her wild grief.

"Hush, hush, dear," he whispered, touching her hair caressingly. "My poor little one, don't cry so bitterly."

But Nancie sobbed on and on, passionately though almost noiselessly; and after a time Dick let her cry without attempting to stop her, for he thought it might do her good.

When she was a little calmer he said,

"Nancie, you are shivering with cold. Wrap that rug round you, there's a dear child, and draw your poor little bare feet up from the floor."

Nancie obediently crouched in the big chair at the bedside, and laid her head down beside Dick again with a despairing gesture that touched him very deeply. He drew her tenderly within his arm, and after a murmured soothing word or two he said, very, very gently,

"My Nancie—can you not trust God to take care of Baby May?"

"Oh Dick, do you think He cares?" she asked, with quivering lips. "Lots of people die—and He doesn't keep them alive."

Dick did not answer; he only held her a little closer.

"And oh, what shall I *do* if she dies?" went on poor Nancie, beginning to sob again. "What *shall* I do? You don't know how sweet—how dear she is. You don't know how lovingly she used to put her dear little arms round my neck and kiss me on both eyes to wake me in

the mornings—and how I loved to hear her say, ‘A little bit Auntie’s, and a little bit Kitty’s—but *all* Nancie’s.’ And only the night before she began to be ill she said—she said, ‘Very likely Baby May will have to go to live with God quite soon.’ Oh Dick, I *can’t* do without her—I can’t! *Say* you think God won’t take her away!”

“ My little Nancie—listen to me. I cannot tell you God will not take away your little sister. Death is a terrible mystery—like pain, and sin, and many other things in this world. We only know He will do what is best for those we love so well.”

But Nancie’s sobs grew wilder.

“ Oh you don’t know,” she gasped, “you can’t know. You can’t feel about it as I do.”

“ Yes dear, I think I can,” said Dick in a very low voice. “ Many, many years ago, I had a dear little sister of my own. But—I lost her.”

Nancie stopped crying, and listened.

“ Did she die?” she whispered.

“ Yes, she died.”

There was a pause ; then Dick went on,

“ She was quite a tiny child when she died—hardly so old as Baby May. She was very fond of me—and would hardly let me leave her for a moment after she was taken ill. Even now, at night, I can fancy I see her dear little pinched face, and feel her little hot fingers clasping mine—” Here Dick stopped suddenly, and cleared his

Nancie took his hand, and squeezed it convulsively.

"What did she die of?" she asked in a low voice.

"Diphtheria. She was only ill for a few days."

Nancie laid her cheek down on the hand she held, and two hot tears fell upon it.

"I can remember thinking my heart must be broken," went on Dick, after a short silence; "for I was only a little fellow, and new to sorrow of any kind. I thought there surely could be no God, or He could not let such cruel things happen. I grew wiser afterwards. But it was a long time before the world seemed quite the same to me again."

"But your mother—did she not help you to bear it?"

"Yes—I don't know what I should have done then without my mother. But a year or two later she was taken away from me."

"Did she die too?"

"Yes," was the brief answer.

"I wonder how you could have borne so many things," said Nancie in an awed kind of voice.

"My dear little Nancie, this life is not everything," Dick answered. Then after a pause he repeated half under his breath, "No, thank God—it is not everything."

"Dick—your face is quite white!" exclaimed Nancie, looking at him anxiously. "Is the pain bad?"

Dick smiled faintly.

"Not much worse than usual," he said. But he drew

"Oh Dick, is it my fault? Have you been talking too much?—or did I awake you by coming in?"

"No, no, dear. I was not asleep."

"Had you not been asleep at all?"

"No."

"But," more anxiously still, "were you perhaps just going to sleep?"

Dick shook his head.

"Can I do anything for you, Dick? Your medicine? could I not give it to you?"

"Yes, dear, I wish you would," he said in a weak voice. "It is on that little table. Half fill the wine-glass, and fill it up with water. There's a kind little woman," he added, as Nancie raised his head a little, and held the glass to his lips.

"Shall I call Atkins?" she whispered, seeing how white his face was still.

"No—I feel better. It is nothing, Nancie. Don't look so terrified."

She put down the wine-glass again, and smoothed the pillows in a grave motherly little way that made Dick smile.

"I had better go now," she said. "Perhaps you may fall asleep. Good-night, dear Dick."

"Good-night, Nancie," he said, as she kissed his forehead softly. "I hope you haven't taken any cold. Keep on the rug; and hold it closely round you in

going upstairs. And Nancie," he added, holding her closely to him for a minute, "try not to fret, my little one. God will take care of Baby May."

"Dick," she whispered, pressing her face to his, "may I ask Him—here—beside you?"

"My child, yes—surely," answered Dick unsteadily.

Nancie knelt down, and prayed her passionate childish prayer for her little sister's life; and as she prayed, she felt the tender touch of Dick's hand on her hair.

When she rose to her feet again Dick drew her head down to his, and silently kissed her tear-stained cheeks. And as he did so she felt, with a curious awe, that his eyelashes were wet too.

"Good-night," she whispered. "I love you, Dick—I will always love you. Nobody is like you."

Then she went softly away—a little ghostly shadowy figure—through the dark room beyond, across the moonlit hall, and up the silent staircase to her room, where she crept into bed beside the sleeping Blinks, and soon fell into an uneasy slumber.

* * * * *

In the morning Baby May was much worse. Dr. Bell came at breakfast-time; and when he went away Aunt Prue was crying, and so was Kitty.

That was a strange, wretched day. The boys sat about

miserably, and crept up and downstairs on tip-toe. It seemed incredible to their strong healthy young natures that Baby May—sunny, joyous little Baby May—should be *dying!* They hung about the house and garden; for a dreadful though unspoken fear possessed them all that if they went far out of reach, Baby May might be gone from them altogether when they came back. Troublesome lumps in their throats rendered speech difficult and humiliating; so Roy whittled bits of wood in an objectless way until the schoolroom looked like a carpenter's shop, Ted stared aimlessly out of the window with his hands in his pockets, and Joe hid himself in the boot-cupboard in the hall, and cried like a baby. As for Nancie, she spent the greater part of the day curled up beside Dick's sofa, with her head hidden on his breast.

Dinner was a trying meal that day. The sun shone in upon the table with what seemed heartless cheerfulness; and Tommy, the bullfinch, who had been sitting dejected and silent since morning, with all his feathers sulkily fluffed out, now suddenly broke into a rapturous flood of melody.

Alas! he whistled “Old Dan Tucker!”

It was too much. A vision of the dear gay little figure, with its bobbing golden curls, and dancing baby eyes, flashed through the minds of all. Nancie burst into tears and rushed from the room. Roy, with an

unwonted mist over his boyish eyes, rose abruptly, and taking down the cage, carried it off to the tool-house.

The day died, and night came. For many hours Baby May had lain in a heavy stupor, with glazed, half-open eyes, and hoarse, uneven breathing. Dr. Bell came again about ten, and as he bade Aunt Prue good-night, Nancie heard him say,

“ If she is alive in the morning, she will be safe.”

The night wore on ; the painful irregular breathing grew lighter, the burning hands cooler. Almost imperceptibly the heavy stupor became a health-giving sleep.

Baby May was saved.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN WHICH MR. LESTER RESIGNS.

"Delightful task, to rear the tender thought,
And teach the young idea how to shoot!"

IT was some five weeks later, and Ruthven Court was in a state of jubilation ; for the small invalid was to come downstairs for the first time, all fear of infection being now over.

It was a matter of sincere thankfulness to Aunt Prue and the elder girls that neither Nancie nor Blinks had taken the fever. As for the boys, they had had it three years ago, all at once ; and a fine time they and all around them had had. Such work there had been to keep them in bed (for theirs was a much milder form of the disease than poor Baby May's) ; such difficulty in getting them to take their medicine, to do the hundred and one things they were required to do, and to leave undone the hundred and one things they were forbidden to do. Kitty and Agatha had been at school then, and poor Aunt Prue had had to wrestle alone with the sick and convalescent demons.

To-day was bright and sunny, and Baby May, at Dick's special request—for it was one of his well days—was to renew her acquaintance with her family in the library. She looked such a fragile little thing, as Roy proudly and carefully carried her into the room. Her eyes looked unnaturally large and blue; and her pretty gold curls had been cut off close to her head. She struggled out of Roy's arms, and ran towards Dick, hugging him round the neck with her thin little arms, and calling out gleefully,

“Oh Dick!—Baby May was very nearly an angel!”

The boys all laughed; but nobody else did; and Dick clasped the little creature within his arm, and with an almost passionate gesture, held her silently against his heart. For he could not have spoken just then; the likeness Baby May bore to that dear little sister of his own who had died so long ago, was more startling now than before her illness.

“Dick—you're holding me too tight!” she whispered.

Dick pressed his lips to the short fluffy hair, and let her go. But even the boys noticed that he lay quite still and silent for a long time.

Meanwhile Major, who evidently considered that he had hitherto been neglected, was rushing round and round Baby May, barking wildly, and absolutely quivering with excitement. Indeed, so excited was he, that he made a sudden and utterly unprovoked attack upon

Oliver Twist—who was placidly performing her toilette at the fire—with the immediate result that she spat and swore, and scratched his eye severely, and that they were both summarily ejected from the room to finish their dispute in the corridor.

Half an hour afterwards Ellen appeared, to inform the boys that Mr. Lester was in the schoolroom.

“Oh, let him wait,” said Mr. Lester’s promising pupils, cavalierly. For they were “playing menagerie” with Baby May and Blinks, and it was momentarily becoming more absorbing and noisy.

“I say, boys,” said Dick suddenly, “suppose you go and get your lessons over and then come back. Baby May ought to sit still for a little now; and besides, you’re making an awful row, and I don’t think I can stand it much longer.”

The boys looked disconcerted; but they never thought of rebelling. It was curious that Dick was the one human being whose right to order them about, to lecture them—to snub them, even—they never questioned. Perhaps, as Joe *niinely*, if ambiguously observed, it was because of “the decent way he talked to a fellow, just as if he (Dick) was not a bit more grown-up than a fellow himself, you know.” At all events Dick was their hero and lawgiver, in spite of his helplessness, and the want of that physical strength and capability which boys as a rule adore. So they reluctantly abandoned

their respective characters of a bear, a lion, and a dromedary, and departed,—followed by Blinks and Nancie, all five revolving lawless plans for the destruction of the unhappy Mr. Lester's peace of mind. Baby May began to whimper ; but Dick suggested that she should come and wind up his watch, which alluring offer she accepted with alacrity.

Meanwhile the boys were causing their tutor to desire madly that either he or they had never been born. Never had they been so stupid, so rude, so utterly objectionable as to-day. Mr. Lester's stock of patience during the past four months had been rapidly dwindling away ; indeed the supply had never been equal to the demand—which was inexhaustible. He was an intensely nervous man, too, and you may be sure the boys—who, of course, had found this out long ago—did not spare him. Nancie was in one of her obstinate moods, and Blinks' mind appeared to be a sunshiny blank. When the last limits of endurance had been reached, the door opened, and Kitty entered.

Mr. Lester rose, of course, and stood talking to her for a few minutes. When the usual commonplaces had been exchanged, Kitty led the way to the window to ask his opinion on some ferns she was growing ; and they remained there for some little time. Now, the boys had divined, in some occult way, that their tutor had succumbed to the charms of their favourite sister ; and

they considered it unpardonable "cheek" on his part. So after a few minutes had passed, Roy growled,

"I say, Kitty, leave Lester alone, and let us get done with these beastly lessons. If you stay beside us we'll be as good as angels. Here's a chair for you."

Kitty sat down, and Mr. Lester prepared to do likewise. He always occupied one particular chair; it was straight as to back, high and broad as to seat, and was covered with a wolf-skin rug. The boys used to say they hated the very sight of that chair.

Mr. Lester, then, calmly reseated himself—grabbed at the air wildly—waved his legs convulsively—and finally disappeared behind his boots! For the seat of the chair had been removed during the inspection of Kitty's ferns, and the treacherous rug covered empty space!

Something in the mixture of bewilderment, rage, and incredulity which chased each other across the victim's face as he sank from view, sent the astounded Kitty into agonies and shrieks of laughter. The boys, of course, were already yelling like demons, and the little girls giggling unrestrainedly. Kitty, however, feeling that it was both unkind and unladylike to give way to the laughter which was consuming her, rushed forward to the assistance of the unhappy young man—and just missed an aimless kick from one of his boots.

"Let me help you," she gasped hysterically, as she

seized his hand in a tight clasp which under any other circumstances would have sent him into the seventh heaven.

A minute more, and by dint of a strenuous haul from Kitty, combined with his own mad efforts, the young tutor stood up and faced his graceless pupils. He was white to his very lips, besides being utterly speechless and trembling with fury. Kitty, angry though she was with the boys, had again abandoned herself to immoderate though most unwilling mirth. The more she tried to check it, the worse it became. She tried to think of the most solemn and gloomy things—of the night when they thought Baby May was dying—of poor Dick's troubles—but in vain. In her mind's eye, she seemed still to see Mr. Lester's waving boots and grey tweed legs—and she wept and screamed with laughter.

Mr. Lester felt bitterly, cruelly hurt. To be placed in such a ridiculous and humiliating position was bad enough; that Kitty should have been a witness of his degradation was worse; but that she should be heartless enough to find amusement therefrom was worst of all. With an utterly untranslatable look at his divinity, who was now almost on the verge of hysterics, and without taking any further notice of his pupils, he walked quietly out of the room, and left the house.

Aunt Prue received a curt note from him in the

morning, in which it was stated that as the Masters Ruthven seemed incapable of either treating him as a gentleman or of behaving as gentlemen themselves, he begged to resign his post of tutor, and remained hers sincerely, F. W. Lester.

After this earthquake Dick gave it as his opinion that the boys had much better go back to St. Ann's. A new head-master reigned there now, who, it was hoped, might be unaware of the young Ruthvens' peculiarities. The boys voted their cousin "a brick," promised to behave "like gentlemen;" and Uncle John's consent being obtained, the matter was arranged.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE STORY GAME.

"Now stir the fire, and close the shutters fast,
Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa round * * *
So let us welcome peaceful evening in."

The Winter Evening.

ONE evening about a fortnight after what Joe subsequently pourtrayed in a spirited caricature as "The Total Eclipse of the Great What Is It?" and when the family as usual were assembled in the library just before tea, the hall-door bell suddenly proclaimed the advent of a visitor. When some little time had elapsed the library door opened, and Ellen, to the surprise of everyone, announced that "Muster Charteris was in the drawing-room."

Kitty blushed a lovely pink; the boys groaned; Blinks and Nancie looked stolidly indifferent; while Baby May screamed delightedly,

"Nice Jerry! Nice Jerry! Baby May loves him!"

A roar of laughter caused the last speaker to disappear abruptly and shamefacedly under the table;

while Kitty, in obedience to a kindly nod and smile from Aunt Prue, went quickly out of the room.

When a very considerable time had elapsed she returned, accompanied by her lover. As they entered the room together, it struck even the boys, that Charteris "was not a bad-looking fellow." As a matter of fact, he was quite the reverse; and he was looking a little less languid, and less superciliously bored to-night than usual, which was a decided improvement.

"Auntie," said Kitty, when greetings had been exchanged all round, "Gerald says he wired to you this morning to say he was coming."

"So I did," said Charteris, addressing Aunt Prue, "but Kitty tells me you haven't had it. I ought to have written, but I didn't know I could get away until this morning. I'm really awfully sorry to take you by surprise in this way; but—"

"We are exceedingly glad to see you," interrupted Aunt Prue with her nicest smile. "But what can have become of the telegram?"

Here Ted suddenly and rather sullenly approached Kitty, holding out a crumpled orange-coloured envelope.

"It's my fault," he said gruffly. "Ellen gave it to me this morning, and asked me to give it to Aunt Prue, and I meant to; but I just stuffed it into my pocket, and quite forgot. You needn't believe me if you don't want to!" he added with a defiant glare at Charteris.

At this opportune moment the bell rang for tea, and awkward explanations were postponed.

Aunt Prue was much exercised in her mind because of the absence of late dinner for Kitty's lover, who however, did not seem to mind at all. Indeed, at his earnest though private request to Kitty, the early dinner hour remained unaltered during his stay at Ruthven Court, and he henceforward dined with his future relations at two, and took his tea at six, as though he had been to the manner born. He had rather a better time during this visit. Perhaps his utter indifference to the boys' tricks rendered their perpetration less *piquant*. I think it is more than likely.

For instance, on the night after his arrival "the three" placed an alarum clock set at 3 a.m. between the mattresses of the visitor's bed, and retired to rest themselves full of unholy joy. Therefore it was disappointing and enraging to be suddenly awakened themselves by the said alarum merrily "going off" at the hour named immediately under Joe's nose. But there was one favourite habit at table which all the young Ruthvens countenanced—yes, even Kitty—which annoyed Charteris beyond expression. It consisted in a somewhat novel way of passing the milk, the butter, cups, &c., from the foot of the table to the head, and *vice versa*. For instance, suppose Joe desired Kitty to pass him down the milk, he threw his tablenapkin full

length "up" the table—still retaining one end, and whoever was nearest the milk placed it on the end of the napkin nearest them, whence it was slowly trailed down to its destination, often doing dire damage on its winding way. Aunt Prue had in vain tried to forbid this "overground system" as her nephews and nieces called it; but since one day when she herself had ~~absently~~ placed a coffee-cup on the tail of Ted's napkin, her expostulations had been met with affectionate scorn. Twice Charteris had been the victim of this "system," upon one occasion receiving the contents of a scalding cup of coffee upon his trousers—thus causing him to narrowly escape uttering an objectionable monosyllable in the presence of his lady-love—and upon another occasion having a plate of broiled ham swept from before his eyes, and torn off the table over Kitty's best frock *en route* for the floor. But these little incidents rarely disturbed Charteris's equanimity; and by degrees the boys began to treat him with an unwilling respect. Indeed on one occasion Roy graciously gave it as his opinion—to a select audience of three, consisting of his brothers and Freddy Turner—that if "Charteris had a little less calm cheek, and put on a little less side, he wouldn't be half a bad fellow." But Ted, who had not yet forgiven Charteris for his summary punishment on the occasion of the "rabbit-pie scrimmage" muttered that the gentleman in question was nothing but "a stuck-

up ass," and added vaguely but ominously that "he would get the conceit taken out of him some day—see if he didn't."

One night after tea they were all, according to wont, assembled in the library, where a new diversion originated by Roy had been popular for the last week. It was called the "story game," and consisted in the obligatory recital by each member of the party of a story—short or long, original or borrowed from some book or newspaper, it didn't matter which—but a story of some kind must be forthcoming. As the stories on the night I speak of were more uproariously applauded than usual, I shall give them just as they were related. I must mention, by the way, that Miss Scrope formed one of the party to-night (much to the boys' disgust), and also Mr. Henniker, the clergyman of the parish, a grey-haired, brown-eyed man of fifty or thereabouts, kind-hearted and genial, and immensely popular at Ruthven Court.

The ceremonies began thus;—Everyone, with eyes honourably closed, drew a numbered ticket from a small red bag passed round by Baby May—the bag containing of course, tickets corresponding in number to the players. Whoever drew number one told the first story, and so on.

To-night Mr. Henniker drew number one.

"Pooh! *I can't tell a story!*" he protested, his brown

eyes twinkling under his heavy eyebrows. "Never do—out of the pulpit."

"Oh, but you must!" broke in a protesting and noisy chorus.

"Well, I can read you one, if that'll do," he said at last, when he could make himself heard, unfolding as he spoke a piece of paper he had taken from his pocket-book. "I cut it out of a newspaper, and I think it's rather funny. Silence now, boys. Wait till I find my glasses."

After a short delay the speaker cleared his throat and read as follows:—

"I heard a good story lately," said Greig, lighting a cigar.

"Let's have it," replied Fortescue briefly.

"Well, the story was," went on Greig, "that a fellow called Jones—a very larky fellow—was stopped in the street of some small town by another man who stammered most fearfully, and who asked Jones to direct him to a shop where he could purchase some tin tacks. Jones directed him, by a very circuitous route, to the only ironmonger's in the place; then he cut round by a bye street, entered the said shop, and knocked smartly on the counter. The proprietor, who had apparently been having his dinner, appeared from the back shop, and Jones addressed him thus,

"H-h-have you any t-t-tin t-t-tacks?"

"‘Oh yes,’ was the prompt reply.

"‘Are they l-l-long t-t-tacks?’

"‘Yes—moderately long.’

"‘H-h-have they sharp p-p-points?’

"‘Yes,’ answered the shopman, rummaging in a drawer for the desired article.

"‘W-w-will they st-t-tand on their h-h-heads?’

"‘I suppose so,’ replied the other with some pardonable impatience, as he poured a few out upon the counter.

"‘Then,’ said Jones, gravely and impressively—'*s-s-sit on them!*’

"And away he bolted.

A few minutes afterwards, the fellow who really stammered, and who really wanted the tacks, arrived upon the scene, and knocked upon the counter as his predecessor had done.

The shopman appeared once more, looking unpleasantly aggressive.

"‘Well?’ he said, in a surly voice.

"‘H-h-have you any t-t-tin t-t-tacks?’ began the new customer.

"But he got no further, for the shopman came charging round the counter like a whirlwind, and kicked him out into the street."

Everybody roared as Mr. Henniker folded the piece of paper and replaced it in his pocket-book.

Charteris knew the story (as I daresay some of you may do); nevertheless he smiled languidly. He rarely laughed, which the boys considered a further proof of his total undesirability.

But Miss Scrope said in her high-pitched querulous voice,

“Oh, Mr. Henniker!—that’s not the kind of story a minister of the gospel should tell, surely! You couldn’t introduce a story of that kind into a sermon!”

At this remark, the boys (to use their own expression) “burst,” and Mr. Henniker said gravely, tugging at his iron-grey moustache,

“No—I’m afraid it would be rather difficult to make it fit in; though my wife says I can do wonders in that way. It might *point* a moral though—eh?”

They all laughed again, and prepared for the next story, which was Baby May’s.

“I’m going to tell one,” cried that sprite, nodding her head gaily at Mr. Henniker from her perch on the arm of Dick’s sofa.

“Well, go on, Baby May,” cried Joe impatiently.

“Once,” began the small narrator, seizing Dick’s moustache in her eagerness to begin—“once—last night in bed, I dreamt, while I was asleep, that a little girl just the same as me, was in bed, and seven—no, *nine* fairies came in and said, ‘Baby May—here’s a box!’”

“*No!*” put in Roy at this point, with an expression of flattering and exaggerated incredulity.

"Yes, really," said Baby May, flopping up and down in wild excitement. "And so the fairies put the box on the bed, with a big silver—no with a big *gold* key in it!" Here she paused, and looked round breathlessly to allow this statement to take due effect.

Ted whistled, in a way indicative of uncontrollable wonder and admiration. Mr. Charteris said, "By Jove!" Mr. Henniker laughed good-naturedly, and exclaimed, "Bless my soul!" Whereupon Baby May continued—leaning forward with round eager eyes, and uplifted little forefinger,

"Well—the little girl opened the box; and *what* do you fink there was in it?" Here the speaker paused again, and surveyed her audience with a delicious assumption of intense and suppressed importance.

"Dolls," said Dick.

"Cats," said Joe.

"Chocolates," suggested Charteris.

"Tea-things," said Kitty.

But to all these ventures the small reciter returned a gleeful and ecstatic,

"No—no—not that!"

"Well, be quick, what was it?" said Ted, who was impatient to tell his own story.

Baby May hung forward until her audience assumed a proper appearance of respectful and breathless attention. Then she said in a loud whisper, nodding her

little cropped head slowly and emphatically up and down the while,

"Well—she opened the box with the gold key, and looked in and saw—and saw—*nuffin at all!*"

Amidst the laughter and applause that followed this unexpected and thrilling *dénouement*, Baby May became so madly and joyously excited that she fell off the sofa, and lumped her head severely; whereupon, forgetting her late brilliancy, she wept bitterly.

Kitty picked her up, and Charteris, with great presence of mind, produced a box of chocolates.

By this time Ted was forging ahead with his story, which ran as follows :

"There was once a fellow at school in America, and his master was a fearful cad, and always made an example of this fellow, whose name was Arthur Ransom. He was a good-looking fellow (Ransom, I mean), and knew what he meant to be when he grew up, and had something better to think of than doing sums, and Latin, and such rubbish.

"One day the master (his name was Phipps) gave Ransom an awful hiding for something he had never done. Ransom knew who had done it, but of course he wasn't going to peach. So he took his thrashing, and just looked at Phipps, and said in his quiet way,

"'We'll settle this in a year or two, Mr. Phipps.'

"Well, five or six years later the war broke out between

the North and South, and Ransom was a lieutenant in the Southern army. At Fort Sumter or somewhere, I forget exactly where, a Yankee officer charged straight at Ransom, and had almost run his sword through him, when Ransom knocked it out of his hand. And when he looked at the Yankee—if it wasn't that cad of a Phipps! So Ransom looked him up and down and said,

“‘We have met at last, Mr. Phipps. I think I have something to settle with you.’

“Phipps knew him at once, and said in his old cheeky way,

“‘I am in your power, I suppose.’ (For his sword was on the ground, and Ransom had his foot on it.)

“Ransom laughed, and moved back a little.

“‘I won’t take your beggarly life,’ he said. ‘I’d scorn to do it. Pick up your sword.’

“The other picked it up ; and Ransom went on, looking him square in the face,

“‘But I guess after this if you want either to thrash your scholars, or fight for your country, you’ll have to use your left hand.’ And with that he chopped off Phipps’ right hand at the wrist.

“But just then a bullet whizzed along, hit Ransom through the heart, and killed him!”

The younger portion of the audience were clearly much impressed by this story (which, it appeared, had been related to Ted by Atkins)—Roy and Joe declaring it to be “a rattler.”

Mr. Henniker shook his head.

"I'm afraid, Ted, that story would sound even worse in the pulpit than mine," he said gravely.

"Oh, I daresay," was the off-hand answer. "It isn't meant for a pulpit-story."

It was Aunt Prue's turn next, and she said, after she had paused a moment or two to count her stitches,

"My story is only the plot of a very beautiful and very clever book Dick lent me, and which I have just finished. The book tells of a man who had an enemy—a man who had done him a deadly injury, which he swore he would never forgive. And he was wicked enough to pray to God that his enemy might be put into his power, that he might kill him. Well, it so chanced by a singular chain of circumstances which I shall not wait to explain, that these two men were left on a desolate ice-bound island. Just those two. And now the man who had prayed for the other's life felt a terrible joy, for he knew the other, who was a much slighter and weaker man than he, was completely in his power. But somehow he felt that he could not kill him then, though he hated him so bitterly. And at last, when his enemy fell ill of a terrible wasting fever, this man who had so desired his death, nursed him, and fed him, and took care of him, as his own brother might have done—"

"He must have been an awful ass," interpolated Joc—"why, there was his chance!"

"Oh no," objected Ted. "He would have been a beastly cad to hurt a fellow when he was ill. But he might have cured him first, and thrashed him afterwards."

Mr. Henniker smiled at this martial justice, and Aunt Prue went on,

"Well, the sick man grew weaker and weaker ; and at last he begged his enemy to forgive him. And the other, after many struggles, for he was a man of strong and lasting passions, *did* forgive him—really forgave him ; and a deep peace fell upon him. That very night the sick man died, and the other was left quite alone. And when he had buried deep, deep under the snow the body of the man who had injured him so deeply, he fell upon his knees in the desolate frozen silence, and thanked God that instead of taking his enemy's life, he had tried to save it, had softened his last hours, and forgiven him."

There was a short silence after Aunt Prue had finished. The boys (who discerned a possible moral), wriggled, and looked uncomfortable. Mr. Henniker, who had also read the book, as I hope you have all done, complimented Aunt Prue on her powers of compression.

Dick held the next number, and he began in his deep, pleasant voice,

"Ted's soldiering story reminds me of one my father used to tell of some twenty years ago when he was in the —th Lancers. A snobbish young fellow called

Blake complained to the Colonel that a certain private, on meeting him in plain clothes, had not saluted him. The private excused himself by saying he had not recognized the officer in question. Whereupon the Colonel gravely issued orders that Mr. Blake should walk up and down the barrack square in plain clothes until Private O'Grady was quite sure he recognised him. O'Grady, who was evidently something of a wag, was dubious as to his powers of recognition for about half an hour, and even then, though he thought he should know Mr. Blake in these clothes, wasn't sure if he could do so in any other suit. So the Colonel ordered Lieutenant Blake to appear in the square for the space of ten minutes in each civilian suit he possessed ; and further, that he was to do the same with every new suit he got, acquainting Private O'Grady of the circumstance."

This story met with general approval.

"I fancy that fellow would think twice before he got a new suit," chuckled Joe, who was busy caricaturing the incident.

"Oh, he exchanged soon afterwards," said Dick smiling.

Ted privately resolved *not* to emulate that young officer, if circumstances ever permitted him to serve his Queen ; and Kitty, who was the next victim, began solemnly,

"Once there was a family—a charming, well-behaved,

saintly family, consisting of three cherub-like boys, and five seraph-like girls. The boys, especially, were the admiration and wonder of the whole county. Then, at home they were so good and gentle their sisters used to be afraid they would die quite soon, or be spirited away ; for they were far too good to live. They were so punctual at meals, so tidy in their persons and habits, so respectful and considerate to their elders—especially to a tutor who—”

“Come, now, I say, Kitty,” burst out an indignant chorus, “*that* won’t wash, you know ! We know quite well you mean us. So you can just begin another !”

“Mean *you* !” repeated Kitty, lifting her pretty eyebrows in mock amazement. “Do *you*, any of you, answer to that description ! I never saw it, I must say. However, that’s the only story I know, and if that won’t do, someone else must take my turn.”

“Well, recite a verse of poetry,” was the magnanimous compromise.

“Oh, certainly,” said Kitty, promptly. “Here goes.

“Mary had a little lamp
Filled full of kerosene ;
She went with it to light the fire,
And has not since *benzine* !”

A delighted yell from the boys greeted this touching effusion.

“Bravo, Kitty !” they shouted approvingly.

"Oh, it's not original," said Kitty, waving her little hands. "I read it in a book the other day, it's been running in my head ever since."

Charteris's turn came next, and he, after pulling his moustache lazily for a minute or so, and looking, as Ted privately observed to Roy, "like a big fool," proceeded as follows :—

"I don't know if I can tell you a regular story ; but I came across an incident in a paper I bought at a railway bookstall the other day, which I know to be true, for my great-grandfather was staying in Brighton—where it happened—at the time. I've often heard my father tell the story, which as far as I remember was this :—One morning bills were stuck up all over Brighton announcing that at four o'clock that afternoon a man would walk for a considerable distance on the sea, from one point to another—I really forget the exact spot. It was a cold autumn afternoon ; but an immense crowd of people assembled at four o'clock, and waited patiently for the extraordinary and daring feat to take place. As the thing was simply a hoax, of course, no such occurrence *did* take place. Next morning, however, fresh bills were posted up, thanking the people for their attendance on the previous day, and stating further, that as the advertiser had won a considerable wager in consequence of same, he begged to invite all those who had been present on the

preceding day, to a cold collation on the Downs that afternoon, at three o'clock precisely. Of course a large multitude flocked to the Downs ; and equally of course, they found—nothing ! The fellow had won a second wager even larger than the first."

The boys were highly delighted with this story, which they allowed wasn't half bad. Mr. Henniker laughed till he was nearly black in the face. Miss Scrope, however, took exception to this incident also.

" But how could anyone walk on the sea ? " she said fretfully. " They must have been very foolish people to expect such a thing ! "

Mr. Charteris adjusted his eyeglass.

" That's just the point, Miss Scrope," he said gravely. " They *were* foolish people."

" Oh, I don't think there's any use in stories of that kind," was the snappish reply.

This was unanswerable. Miss Scrope's turn, however, came next.

" Oh, I don't suppose my stories would be considered interesting," she said in an offended tone ; for she had seen distinct suspicion of a smile under the three moustaches present. " Though certainly if I were to tell any, they would have the advantage of being about things that really *did* happen."

" Do oblige us, Miss Scrope," said Charteris, with such a deferentially beseeching look in his dark blue eyes that Miss Scrope was mollified at once.

"One of my favourite reminiscences," she began in a complacent voice, as she smoothed the queer little frills that adorned her wrists, "is of a ball in Dublin many years ago where I was present under the wing of dear Lady Cobsley. I was quite a girl then, and—ahem—not unsought after. For I have been a beauty in my day, my dears, though I daresay you wouldn't believe it."

"Not much!" interpolated irreverent Joe in an undertone.

"One of Ireland's most distinguished painters was among the guests upon the evening I speak of, and most respectfully asked permission to paint my portrait. He desired that it might form one of a set upon which he was then engaged, showing different types of high-class female beauty. And he was pleased to add—ahem—that my type was the highest he had seen." And Miss Scrope simpered and bridled in comical semi-embarrassment.

"Does type mean forehead?" asked Joe with seeming innocence. But he meant it wickedly; for it was a favourite joke among these graceless boys that if Miss Scrope's forehead had been any higher, it would have formed part of the back of her head.

She did not answer Joe's guileless question; indeed I don't think she heard it, having lapsed into dreamy retrospection of past triumphs and glories

"What did you wear?" asked Kitty presently.

"I wore," said Miss Scrope, after a pause, "a white flowered lace skirt flounced up to the waist over a pale green silk slip, with a round bodice and short sleeves, for —ahem—I was considered to have a beautiful neck and arms. My hair fell in long natural ringlets over my shoulders, and round my neck I wore a slender gold chain clasped by a small diamond butterfly, the gift of the gentle and courteous lady who afterwards became the Duchess of B——; you will excuse me mentioning names, my dears."

"How interesting," said Kitty in all sincerity. "Boys, do be quiet."

For these irrepressible youths were writhing in agonies of strangled laughter over a sketch hastily scribbled by Joe, of Miss Scrope in the costume described.

But that lady went on in triumph,

"Well, my dears, within the next week I had fifteen offers of marriage!"

Having made this startling statement, Miss Scrope leaned back in her chair with an air of mingled humility and pride impossible to describe.

There was an awkward and fearful silence. Everybody—though not one of them could have told exactly why—was simply dying to laugh.

"But what was the story?" asked practical Blinks at last.

This was the climax.

Charteris dexterously upset Baby May's box of sweets ; and in the scuffle to pick them up most of the others assisted, and indulged their risible faculties to the utmost. When order was restored, it was found that Joe held the next number. He—prefacing hastily that he couldn't tell any stories, being a truthful boy—offered to recite a poem instead, which, he assured his audience, though not original, was both moral and pathetic. The "poem" was as follows :—

"A little green apple hung up in a tree,
Calling, 'Johnnie, come Johnnie, come Johnnie !'
And it was as modest as modest could be,
Saying, 'Johnnie, come Johnnie, come Johnnie !'
And Johnnie he came in his sweet childish way,
And ate up that fruit as his own lawful prey. . . .
The angels in Heaven are singing to-day,
'Here's Johnnie ! Here's Johnnie ! Here's Johnnie !'"

At this poem Miss Scrope was much scandalized, and said so.

"I'm sure, Mr. Henniker," she said severely, fixing her "cold grey eye" upon her pastor, who was violently amused. "I'm sure it ill becomes a minister of the gospel to laugh at such profanity. Joe—you are a very wicked little boy, and old enough to know better than to joke on sacred things."

"But an apple's not a sacred thing !" expostulated Joe ; "and neither was Johnnie—until he ate it !"

At this Mr. Charteris actually laughed aloud.

"Ah! apples have been a sad temptation ever since the world began," said Mr. Henniker, with a humorous twinkle in his eyes.

Miss Scrope primmed up her mouth; and Kitty said hastily,

"Agatha, it's your turn, isn't it?"

"I think Miss Scrope is quite right—" began Agatha,

"Oh don't talk, get on with your story," interrupted Ted, with brotherly courtesy.

"My story is of a poor little boy whose life was very unhappy—" began Agatha again, with a very ill-natured look at the last speaker.

"I thought as much," muttered Roy explosively.

"I knew him!" burst out Joe the irrepressible, with suspicious haste. "He went to your Sunday class, and his name was Barney Milligan. Fire away, Agatha!"

Agatha rose, and glared at her giggling brothers.

"You are the most abominably ill-bred little wretches I ever knew!" she exclaimed passionately. "And I wish I might never see any of you again!"

And with these words she hurried out of the room.

"Joe," said Dick gravely, "that was hardly fair."

Joe did not answer; he only kicked up his heels in subdued mirth. (He was lying on his stomach, as usual.)

Roy's turn came next, and his story was short and tragic.

"I was reading last night about a young fellow—an artist," he said soberly. "His name was Philip Reeves; and he lived in a wretched little attic in London, and painted splendid pictures, only no one would buy them. And one was so fine that another fellow, an artist too, advised him to send it to the Royal Academy when it was finished. So Reeves worked away at this picture, did almost without food, and sold almost everything he had to get paints and things. But no one knew how poor he was—for he was an awfully proud fellow. Well—he finished his picture, and sent it, and it was accepted. And besides that, a gentleman, who knew a good picture when he saw one, had offered to buy it right off. But when the letter came telling Reeves about it, they found him lying dead in his lodgings; and the doctors said he had been starved to death."

"Ay, ay, my boy," said Mr. Henniker in a low voice as Roy finished, "there's many a story like that in the world—many a one—many a one!"

There was a short silence. Baby May had climbed from Mr. Charteris's arms to Dick's; and now lay curled up there, half-asleep.

"It's my turn," announced Blinks in a brisk voice.

"Once there was a man," she began glibly, "and he was in a desert and a lion came and he took a thorn out of its foot and it was grateful. And afterwards when he was thrown to it to eat, it wouldn't because it loved him so!"

Having repeated all this in one breath, and therefore with no stops to speak of, Blinks hugged Oliver Twist to her bosom, and became silent.

"Why you little fraud!" exclaimed Ted, with lofty contempt and disgust. "That's 'Androcles and the Lion!' Who do you suppose wants to hear stories out of the French exercise book?"

"I didn't know it mattered," said the unabashed Blinks. "But I know another! Once there was a woman and she lived in the Arabian Nights, and she got up at night to eat dead bodies, and grew into a thing called a ghoul, and could only eat grains of rice at dinner."

But as this had been her story on the last evening but one, she was promptly extinguished, and had her arms pinched until she screamed.

"Now, Spitfire!" called out Ted, "you've got the last number."

"No, I can't tell any," was the sulky answer. For toothache, not fierce but gnawing, made Nancie feel at war with all mankind, and she was plainly in what the boys called "a howling temper."

"Yes, you must. Come on," said Roy autocratically.

"No, I won't. So there!" twisting herself about, and looking very obstinate and determined.

"Tell us you're a nice, sweet-tempered little angel!" suggested Joe in a jeering voice, "That'll be the finest storv you ever told—and the biggest."

Nancie's eyes flashed, and she jumped to her feet, forgetful of the presence of strangers—forgetful of everything except her own wicked little temper. She was just beginning to pour forth a torrent of furious passionate words, when Dick said quietly,

"Nancie—Baby May has fallen asleep. Hadn't you better take her upstairs, and put her to bed? And I say boys, isn't it nearly time for you to get your lessons ready for to-morrow? Suppose I help you with them to-night instead of Kitty?"

For this timely offer Charteris blessed him; and Kitty accepted it with alacrity.

Nancie—at the sound of Dick's voice—had calmed down at once. She now went slowly towards him, and took Baby May in her arms. And no one but Dick saw her wet, repentant eyes, nor heard her say, with a passionate squeeze of his hand,

"Thank you—*dear* Dick, thank you!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A TINY SOCRATES.

"Thy years are awful ; and thy words are wise !"

Iliad.

A FEW days later Baby May, who was now allowed to be out of doors in the warm sunny forenoons, was jumping over and around the garden roller, catechizing "old James" on things in general—a favourite pastime of hers, and one that tried him sorely. He was busily engaged on this particular forenoon in raking the gravel in front of the house ; and Baby May was "helping" him, and offering occasional suggestions.

"No leaves to sweep up now, James," she said, shaking her head solemnly.

"No miss, not till autumn be come."

"If you counted every single leaf you ever swept up—how many would there be, James?"

"Law miss, *I* don't know," said James, staggered by this gymnastic feat in arithmetic.

Baby May pulled up a bunch of weeds ; then she said,

"James—if all the people in the world were leaves, *who* would sweep them up?"

As this problem had never suggested itself to James's simple mind, he felt rather at a disadvantage.

"Why, them's not questions for a nice little missy to ask," he said remonstrantly.

"Well; but who would?" she persisted. "Would the angels?"

"I don't know nothing about it, missy," was the stolid answer.

Baby May regarded him solemnly out of her great blue eyes.

"You don't know *much*, James, *do* you?" she said in gentle reproof.

"I hope I know my duty, Miss May."

"What is duty, James?"

"Duty's what folks have got to do, missy, whether they like it or not, I expect," the old gardener answered, after pausing to reflect a moment or two.

"Like going to bed when you're not sleepy, and getting up when you are sleepy?" queried Miss Socrates.

"Ay, ay, missy, just them kind of things."

"Oh, James, there's a great ugly worm!" exclaimed his small interlocutor in sudden disgust.

"Nothing's ugly that the Lord's made, Miss May," was the somewhat sententious answer.

Baby May placed a respectful distance between herself and the obnoxious worm ; then she said very slowly,

“Did the Lord make you, James?”

“To the best of my belief, miss.”

The child regarded him curiously for a minute ; then she said in a dubious voice,

“I ’spose it would be a very long time ago when He made you ?”

“Nigh upon seventy years, Miss May.”

“Very likely you were quite pretty when you were new !” continued the little philosopher reflectively.

“Ah, you’re a queer one,” muttered James with a grim smile.

“Did you ever see a wolf, James ?” was the young lady’s next question.

“Well no, miss. And no loss either, if all tales be true.”

“Do wolves eat people, James ?”

“So I’ve heard, Miss May.”

“What makes them do it ?”

“Well, missy, I expect it’s pure cussedness, and nothin’ else,” said James, scratching his head in perplexity.

Baby May pondered.

“Do you think a wolf would eat you, James ?”

“Well, miss, I wouldn’t like to give one the chance.”

“But *would* it ?”

"That it would—in no time."

His small inquisitor eyed him very hard; then she said in a confidential whisper,

"James—*do* you think you'd have a very nice taste?"

"Well, miss," returned James, rather affronted, "I expect I'd have much the same taste as other people."

Baby May looked doubtful, and leaned thoughtfully against the roller, so evidently preparing another volley of brain-softening questions that old James hobbled hastily away to another part of the garden.

As he did so a smothered laugh from a garden seat half concealed by the laurels, made Baby May turn and run rapidly in that direction.

"Jerry, Jerry!" she cried, flinging herself upon Mr. Charteris, whom she, of late, had persisted in addressing by that undignified appellation.

He was lying full length on the seat, cigar in hand, absolutely shaking with laughter—a very rare exertion on his part, as we know. He and Baby May were great friends, and had long conversations on various subjects, which amused Charteris mightily. He did not know much about children; and thought Baby May the quaintest and oddest of little mortals.

It was only to this little child, to Kitty, and to Dick, that Charteris ever showed the most natural side of his character. And in consequence, those of his acquaintance who were not skilled in character-reading, considered

him a very supercilious, very affected, and not at all an agreeable young man.

Baby May, however, evidently thought differently ; for she climbed up beside him, pulled his cigar from between his lips, kissed his moustache and replaced the cigar again, all with an air of calm satisfaction very delightful to behold. Charteris submitted in silence, put his arm round her, and knocked the ash off the end of his cigar.

"Now, we'll talk," observed Baby May, having settled herself comfortably.

"All right," was the placid answer.

Baby May examined his sleeve-links with interest ; then she said contemplatively,

"I think you know more things than old James does."

"Much obliged. Shouldn't wonder if I do," murmured Charteris.

"Jerry—you're going to sleep !" giving him an indignant little shake. "Open your eyes quick ! I want to ask you things."

He lazily obeyed ; and resigned himself to his fate.

"Jerry," resumed his tormentor, twining her tiny fingers in one end of his long moustache, "are you afraid of serpents ?"

"Yes," laconically.

"Did you ever see one ?"

"Lots."

"I don't think you should be afraid of a serpent, Jerry. It's nothing but a long tail with a head on."

"The head bites, though," was the brief reply.

"Jerry," she began again, after considering this last contingency, "if a wolf ate you up quite suddenly, and you died, where would you like to go?"

"Don't know," sleepily.

"No, but Jerry, Agatha says when people die they must go somewhere. Do you know where I'd like to go?"

Jerry shook his head negatively.

"To fairyland!" was the jubilant answer. "In a gold carriage with lovely butterflies to draw it—and a flower crown on!"

"Ah!" said her companion, languidly blowing a cloud of smoke into the air.

"But very likely," proceeded the child thoughtfully—"very likely I would have to be an angel. Would you rather be an angel, Jerry?"

Charteris preserved a discreet silence.

"You would have to have wings, you know," proceeded Baby May judicially. "Oh Jerry! you'd look *awful* funny with wings!"

"I'm afraid I should," assented Jerry, looking faintly amused.

"Then your 'pectacle, you know," she continued, with a frown, pressing one fat little forefinger on her

companion's cherished eyeglass. "You couldn't have *that* on if you were an angel! None of the angels in pictures ever have them on. Jerry—don't laugh with your cigar in your mouth. You'll choke—and then you'll *have* to be an angel just directly—before dinner! And oh Jerry, Kitty said I was to tell you dinner was nearly ready—and I quite *vegot*!"

"Come on then," said Charteris, rising from his recumbent position, and taking the chubby hand held out to him.

"Why do you smoke things, Jerry?" inquired this little torment, as they crossed the lawn.

"I'm sure I don't know, little one," said Charteris seriously. "A bad habit, I suppose."

"Kitty says it's a *very* bad habit to bite your nails, or put pins in your mouth, or leave the soap in the bath," observed Baby May, gazing up at the sky in a reflective way.

"Kitty is quite right, as she always is," returned Kitty's lover loyally. "But you see I don't bite my nails, nor put pins in my mouth."

"Do you ever leave the soap in the bath, though?" asked Baby May, with an air of severity.

"Oh, very likely," he answered absently, as he pitched away his cigar.

"Do you have a bath every morning?" inquired Baby May with interest.

"Yes," was the unsuspecting reply.

"Would you like me to come and hand you the soap, and put it back in the soap-dish for you?" she continued with an engaging smile.

"No thank you, dear, I think I can manage nicely by myself," answered Charteris inarticulately.

"Or I could ask Kitty to do it for you," went on his small companion in a cheerful voice. "You see she's bigger; and sometimes I can't reach the soap-dish, unless its *twite* near the edge of the washstand."

"Oh I say, you know, you musn't say these things to Kitty," said Charteris in an alarmed voice. "You know—"

"Oh, she doesn't mind," was the gracious reply. "She often hands me the soap when Nancie's not there, and fastens my things at the back. I 'spose you can fasten your own things at the back?"

"Generally," admitted the person addressed, in smothered accents.

"I 'spose you've no strings to tie?" said Baby May, knitting her small brows.

"No," acquiesced Charteris, wondering uneasily where this crucial inquiry into the mysteries of his toilet was going to stop.

However, they had reached the house by this time, and he was providentially rescued by Nancie, who bore off the little chatterbox to be washed for dinner.

Poor Charteris was in mortal dread during the entire meal, lest Baby May should again bring up the subject of his ablutions, in which case he felt he should certainly blush himself to death. But that eccentric little mortal had already forgotten all about the late conversation in the ecstatic news that Joe had got a canary for her, which was to be her "very own" and nobody else's. Charteris blessed that canary !

CHAPTER XX.**A PAINFUL EXPERIENCE.**

“ Experience is a good school, but the fees are somewhat high ! ”
Heine.

FOUR boys were collected in a secluded part of the wood which ran alongside the road leading from Ruthven Court to the village of Kelby.

A dead silence reigned, and the scent of tobacco was in the air ; for the four boys were the three Ruthvens and Freddy Turner, and in each boy's mouth was a large, newly-lighted cigar. The cigars had, I am sorry to say, been abstracted by Master Turner from Charteris's cigar-case, which he had foolishly left lying upon a garden-seat. The Ruthven boys had at first demurred a little at this misappropriation of property ; but Freddy had assured them loftily that fellows often helped themselves to other fellows' cigars and tobacco—his Uncle Bob said so. This settled the matter ; until Ted suddenly remarked that he was sure Dick would think it “ low.” Freddy replied by ob-

serving that he rather thought Dick was a muff. Whereupon Roy immediately knocked him down. Having picked himself up again—in no wise disconcerted, for he was accustomed to these amenities from the young Ruthvens, and never resented them—Freddy sulkily observed that he didn't mean any harm. His companions muttered that they'd "just advise him not to say it again—that was all."

Master Turner, by the way, though very demure in the presence of his elders, was not exactly either a manly or an honourable youth; nor was he in any way an edifying companion for less knowing youths. (But this by the way.)

Hitherto, the Ruthven boys had not looked upon the art of smoking as one of the necessary accomplishments of a gentleman. Dick often smoked a cigar after dinner, they knew, and Charteris smoked whenever he got a chance; but the idea of following either of these examples had never as yet occurred to any one of the boys—until to-day. when Freddy Turner had offered to initiate them into those poignant joys which lie in the consumption of tobacco. However, there were the cigars, and they looked uncommonly knowing and tempting. Freddy produced matches, struck one, and with a *blasé* air of finding the whole thing rather a bore than otherwise, lit one of the cigars, having previously cut off the end, which, he informed his pupils,

was the correct thing to do. The other cigars followed suit, and all four were soon in full blast.

"Have you ever smoked before, Freddy?" asked Roy, when some minutes had passed in silence, during which the novices privately thought the cigars had a "most beastly taste."

"Oh, not often," was the jaunty answer. "Never unless my Uncle Bob comes down."

"Do you like it?" pursued Roy reflectively—"as an amusement, you know? I think it's slow. Don't you?"

"Oh no—it's uncommonly jolly when you get up to the way," said Master Turner, in a patronising voice.

"Does it take long to get up to the way?" asked Ted dubiously. He had swallowed several whiffs by this time, and was beginning to feel rather queer.

"Oh, it's like everything else—it wants practice," observed Freddy, who had been judiciously removing his "weed" from his lips every few seconds, and was inhaling very delicately.

"Well, if I go on much longer I shall be sick," observed practical Roy, when some minutes had elapsed. And as he spoke he stoically pitched his cigar over his shoulder. "I think it's beastly, if you ask me," he added scornfully, as a contemptuous smile flitted across his instructor's features. "I don't know how Charteris gets through all the cigars he does in a day. I

.shouldn't wonder if it's all a show off, and that he's deadly ill when he goes to bed."

"Not he," said Freddy. "Why he doesn't smoke a quarter as many as my Uncle Bob. I didn't think you'd have caved in so soon, Roy."

"Do you think these are very good cigars?" inquired Ted at this point, in rather a faint voice. "They've an awfully queer taste."

Freddy laughed in a superior way.

"Oh, they're all right," he said carelessly. "Hallo! young one—floored already?" This last remark was addressed to the unhappy Joe, whose face had assumed a curious green shade, and whose cigar lay neglected by his side.

"Oh no, I'm only taking a rest," was the muffled reply.

But presently Joe felt that further disguise of his feelings would be impossible.

"Oh, I say, Freddy," he moaned wretchedly. "Is it always like this? Oh, I feel frightful!"

A harrowing scene ensued, during which Ted—who was dying to be ill too, but felt that a soldier *must* learn to smoke, or be for ever disgraced in the eyes of his brothers in arms—held the loathsome cigar firmly between his shaking lips, replying weakly to Freddy's jokes, and painfully endeavouring to make witty remarks in reply. He even found strength to remove

his cigar with an exquisite crook of his little finger, and simultaneously blow out a cloud of smoke, with his head well thrown back—as he had seen Charteris do, when suddenly a horribly cold, damp perspiration seemed to break out all over him ; sky, trees, and his companions' faces swayed and swung in a curious, solemn jig ; and then—he too gave in finally and hopelessly.

Now, whether it was that Charteris's cigars were extra strong (as a matter of fact they were remarkably well-flavoured "*Intimadads*"), or whether it was that in his heartless mirth at his companions' agonies, Freddy had swallowed more nicotine than on previous occasions, I cannot say ; but certain it is that to his surprise and indignation he too suddenly became aware that he would be intensely grateful if the earth would open and swallow him up.

Nothing so convenient happened, however (it doesn't usually), and for a time he was as miserable and degraded a boy as anyone would wish to see.

"Well, you're a pretty lot!" said Roy, turning away in derisive disgust. (To tell the truth he didn't feel quite "the thing" himself, though he had abandoned his cigar so promptly.) "I say, you'd better look sharp and hurry home ; there's the first tea-bell."

"Oh, I don't care if I never see tea or anything else again!" moaned Joe feebly.

While Ted raised himself temporarily from his

recumbent position to gasp—addressing the now wretched Freddy—

“If I don’t thrash you within an inch of your life, Freddy Turner, for this—” Then he collapsed again.

But Freddy was much too far gone himself for any retort. Indeed he lay on one arm, motionless and deathly pale, groaning painfully at intervals. I may mention in confidence that he had never before smoked anything stronger than a very mild cigarette of “Uncle Bob’s”; therefore he was feeling rather bad.

“Well—you can’t lie here all night, you know,” began Roy, sitting down on the stump of a tree, and wondering why he felt so giddy.

“Oh, shut up,” muttered Ted inarticulately.

Roy thought he would lie down for a minute or two, and did so.

Just at that moment a malignant fate decreed that no less a personage should walk through this particular part of the wood than Mr. Charteris himself—smoking a similar cigar to those which had just done such deadly work.

Arrived upon the scene of action, he stopped short, and gazed silently upon his fallen foes.

The boys’ white faces, the half-smoked cigars, the ominous and unwonted silence—all told their own tale.

“My dear lads,” said Charteris quietly, but with the

faintest suspicion of a smile under his moustache, "if you had told me you intended graduating in the art of smoking, I could have given you something a little milder than *these!*" touching one of the fatal weeds with the toe of his boot.

No one answered him.

"Poor little beggars!" he muttered *sotto vōce*. "Well, it'll be a lesson, I suppose—until the next time."

And as he wended his way towards the Court he soliloquized,

"I *thought* I hadn't smoked seven cigars since dinner-time. Could have sworn it! And, by Jove, I was right!"

* * * * * *

Long, long after tea-time, three pale and dejected-looking boys, insensible alike to the joys of tea or supper, dragged themselves slowly up the broad oak staircase at Ruthven Court, and put themselves to bed in silence and gloom.

Roy soon fell asleep. Ted lay for a long time trying weakly to remember anecdotes of soldiers who had *not* smoked. Vague visions of Sir Philip Sydney floated through his mind; then he sank into an uneasy doze, and dreamt that he was thrashing Freddy Turner on the field of battle, with a glittering sword which would keep turning into an enormous cigar, when the Colonel rode

up, and fiercely told him (Ted) that if he didn't stop being sick directly, he would have him kicked out of the service. As for poor Joe, he was too actively ill all night to sleep at all, except by fits and starts.

First thing in the morning Kitty appeared, like an avenging angel, bearing upon a tray three large cups of that nauseous compound called Gregory's Mixture. Joe and Ted, who still felt far from comfortable, swallowed theirs down before they had time to realize the indignity offered them. But Roy indignantly emptied his cup out of the window (thus accidentally bedewing old James, who happened to be passing), and went to school as usual.

This degrading sequel, however, was not communicated to Freddy Turner. And I know for a fact, that the young Ruthvens totally abandoned the (to them) visionary joys of smoking, for a very considerable time.

CHAPTER XXI.

TREATING PRINCIPALLY OF DISAGREEABLES.

"Oh how full of briars is this working-day world!"

UPON the following morning the young gentlemen departed for school in no very amiable frame of mind (as far at least as Joe and Ted were concerned). These two latter were armed with the usual stereotyped kind of note from Aunt Prue:—

"Please excuse Ted's absence, as he was unwell yesterday." "Please excuse Joe's absence as he was unwell yesterday."

Before Mr. Lester's advent Kitty and Agatha had occasionally written notes for their brothers; but the masters at St. Ann's had objected to the frequency of these effusions, which were forthcoming on the slightest pretext. Agatha's, being written under a keen sense of duty and conscientiousness, usually took one of the following forms:—

"Please excuse Roy, as he was too late for school

yesterday."—"Please excuse the non-preparation of Ted's lessons, as he forgot them."—"Please excuse Joe's absence yesterday, as he was locked up for disobedience." These latter notes (which by the way, were always sealed up) were pronounced by the boys to be low and "caddish," and infinitely inferior to Kitty's, which were more in this style:—

"Please excuse Roy's absence, as he was particularly engaged yesterday."—"Please excuse Joe's absence, as he was unavoidably prevented from attending school yesterday;" or "Please excuse Ted's absence, as he did not feel at all well yesterday,"—and so on.

On one memorable occasion when neither Aunt Prue, Kitty, nor Agatha were available, they had enrolled the services of the then-reigning nursemaid at Ruthven Court (their own notes they had found on various occasions to be worse than useless)—and the following remarkable effusion had found its way to St. Ann's:—

"Please excuse all the Boys as they have Gone for Moths yesterday, and are Also Ill.

"With kind Remembrances, hoping This finds you as it Leaves me at Present,

"eliza jones."

The boys discovered too late that this curious literary specimen was carefully sealed up; however, trusting that it would be "all right," they delivered it with engaging nonchalance to the stern Dr. Phillips. He, supposing it

to be an impudent practical joke on their part at his expense, gave all three a very sound thrashing, the "kind remembrances" of which rendered them so superior to fatigue for some days that they eschewed the luxury of sitting down. As for "eliza jones," she was ignominiously "sent to Coventry," by her indignant nurslings, and no tearful protestations on her part could persuade them that she had not "done it on purpose."

Well, on the morning next but one after the disastrous cigar campaign, the boys, as I have said, were trudging moodily schoolwards; for what they were pleased to consider the insulting demeanour of Mr. Charteris anent that humiliating episode rankled in their minds, and caused them to pant for vengeance. Indeed, that very morning just after breakfast, their future brother-in-law had politely offered his cigar-case to all three in turn, with a suspicion of a smile under his thick moustache that made them long to terminate his existence on the spot. The whole household were included in their fierce resentment, even Kitty; and a growing desire to "pay them all out" culminated to-day in a plot which will be divulged later.

"It would just serve them all jolly well right," said Roy savagely; "and it'll pay them out all round."

"And just teach Charteris to put on less side," observed Ted, who was the proud originator of the plot alluded to.

"It'll be the best lark we ever had," chuckled Joe.

After some consultation they came to the conclusion that it would be better not to tell Dick anything of the projected "lark."

"It might worry him, you see," observed Ted considerately.

"So it might," acquiesced Joe.

"Besides, he hasn't been so well the last few days," added Roy, as he picked up a stone to throw at a blackbird. "He's sure to be all right by then, though."

"Oh yes, he's never so bad for more than a day or two," supplemented Joe.

"Poor old Dick," said Roy after a pause. "It's an awful pity about him. What a stunning fellow he would be if he was well, and could go about you know, and that."

"He's a stunning fellow now," said Ted shortly.

"Oh, he's a regular brick," assented Joe. "Bet you he enjoys the lark as much as any of us."

"Oh, sure to," chimed in the others, so emphatically that anyone might have seen that they had serious doubts as to his doing anything of the kind.



It was Saturday; a chilly, gusty day—unless, and a little depressing. Being Saturday, it was a holiday as

far as the boys were concerned ; and they had been in wild spirits since the early morning. Immediately after the eight o'clock breakfast they all three piled themselves upon the back of that much-enduring pony William of Orange, who, after vainly trying to get rid of them by legitimate means, settled the matter by calmly lying down on the grass, much to his young masters' astonishment. He then trotted off down the long meadow, and refused to be caught again on any pretext whatever. The three then invaded the kitchen-garden (old James having just gone in to breakfast), and with a methodical precision and care worthy of a better cause, deliberately uprooted two rows of peas, planted by James only yesterday, and replaced them by a corresponding quantity of onions, which had been hung up in a net in the stable. After this praiseworthy performance they hurried off to the cross-roads to meet Freddy Turner, with whom they had some deeply-interesting conversation, the purport of which caused them to execute an ecstatic war-dance in silence. Freddy then created an immense sensation by producing a small pistol and a dozen cartridges, which articles he had (as he airily informed his companions) "borrowed from his father." (So he had ; but he omitted to mention that his father was unaware of the transaction.) An exciting hour followed, during which Roy's handkerchief (which, pinned to the trunk of a tree, served as a target) was

simply riddled with small bullet-holes. A serious dispute arose, however, as to who should fire the last remaining cartridge—Freddy insisting that *he* should, as the pistol was his (for the time); and Roy equally insisting that *he* should, as it was his turn. A stand-up fight was the result; and Master Turner returned home with a swelled nose and a black eye. Roy had his knuckles cut, but otherwise (as far as his personal appearance went) he was uninjured.

This was one of Dick's bad days. He had had a terrible night of pain; and was too physically exhausted either to talk or be talked to. Therefore the library to-day was forbidden ground. The boys felt this to be a personal injury—under existing circumstances—and after parting with Freddy, solaced themselves by tormenting Agatha, who was cross and snappish to-day, for Aunt Prue had begged her to stay at home from her district-visiting to assist her in some household work, which had accumulated alarmingly owing to the cook being laid up with a sore throat. Such mundane matters jarred upon the nerves of the philanthropic young lady, and she performed the duties alluded to in a sketchy and half-hearted way, very trying to Aunt Prue's soul. Her brothers, after reducing her almost to the verge of tears by following her about with an enormous frog (to which animals she had a shuddering abhorrence), finally stole swiftly upstairs to her room, and carefully dropped the creature into her water jug.

Kitty was in the schoolroom, sewing diligently at new serge frocks for the little girls, to be worn at church on the morrow. While Charteris—wondering vaguely why dressmakers couldn't be got to do that sort of thing—was leaning back in a huge arm-chair, lazily watching her, and taking advantage of the permission she had given him to smoke unlimited cigars. They were alone, and he was describing in roseate hues the probable life of the future Mrs. Charteris. As he was not a demonstrative lover, his presence did not materially interfere with Kitty's sewing.

He was looked upon quite as one of the family during this second visit, and no longer treated with ceremony as a visitor. I allude of course to Aunt Prue and the girls—for the boys, I believe, would have dispensed with ceremony even in the case of Royalty.

Presently Baby May entered, with swollen eyes, and tear-bedewed cheeks, holding, firmly clutched in both chubby hands, the lifeless and bloodstained form of her beloved canary.

"Oh Kitty!—oh Jerry!" she wailed, "Oliver Twist has eated my canary!"

And as though to blazon the fact, Oliver Twist walked in at that very moment, blandly smiling, so to speak, and regarding the body of her hapless victim with hungry eyes and gyrating tongue.

"Go away—bad wicked *beast!*!" sobbed Baby May, stamping her little foot with rage.

Kitty condoled with and cheered the stricken mourner, and Charteris offered an empty cigar-box as a shrine for the canary's mangled remains. Baby May dried her eyes, and became absorbed in watching "Jerry" wrapping the corpse in tissue paper and cotton-wool previous to burial. Just as this interesting ceremony was completed, the boys burst into the room, and graciously offered to conduct the funeral, which they suggested should take place from the tool-house. Baby May became quite excited, and rushed off to look up Nancie and Blinks, who, upon hearing of the catastrophe, indignantly lectured and whipped the callous and unrepentant Oliver Twist, and shut her up in the boot-cupboard.

Some ten minutes later the funeral *cortège* emerged from the tool-house, and marched solemnly to the foot of the garden, Baby May in front bearing the cigar-box, and Joe behind, evoking fearful and wonderful sounds from his violin. Arrived at a certain old cherry-tree, the procession halted; Roy dug a large hole, and gravely laid the cigar-box therein; then piled in the earth, and formed it into an imposing pyramid, on the top of which Ted, with every evidence of uncontrollable grief, planted a healthy young gooseberry bush. Nancie, Blinks, and Baby May, overcome by the solemnity of the occasion, wept in concert. But the boys gave way to unholy laughter, and played leap-frog all the way back to the tool-house.

And there, on the top of a pyramid of flower-pots, was the unburied body of the unfortunate canary!

After a moment's dismayed pause, Baby May opened her mouth and simply howled with grief and rage.

"It's a shame, boys!" exclaimed Nancie wrathfully—"an abominable shame! Come with me, Baby May, and I will bury it for you." And seizing the maltreated remains of the canary, she took her little sister by the hand, and they had, as the latter observed tearfully, "a nice little funeral of their own."

After dinner, Nancie was alone in the schoolroom, struggling with a French exercise for school on Monday morning. Of course it ought to have been done on Friday, but—it hadn't! Dick usually helped her with her French lessons; but he, poor fellow, as I have said, was too ill to be disturbed. So Nancie wearily, but painstakingly, wrote and scraped out, and searched the dictionary for elusive idioms.

Suddenly the door opened, and Baby May made her appearance, evidently in great excitement.

"Joe says you are to come to see a ex—e—cution!" she said, dancing first on one leg, and then on the other, and getting out the long word with laborious care.

"Oh, go away, dear," said Nancie impatiently.

"*Must* come, Nancie," said Baby May, beginning to weep. "Joe *said* you were to come, and if you don't he's going to dig up my canary."

"To come where?" asked Nancie, in a tired, cross voice.

"To a ex—e—cution! In the tool-house!"

"Well, wait a minute," said her sister (who, indeed, rarely refused her small tyrant anything); "I must finish this one sentence."

Then she slowly and carefully translated and transcribed one of those exasperatingly impossible and ridiculous sentences in which our foreign grammars abound, dried her pen, and shortly,

"Come on then."

As they approached the tool-house sounds of wild and abandoned laughter, amid which Blinks' expostulating giggles were plainly audible, smote Nancie's ears, and made her feel crosser than before. But when she entered the tool-house, and became aware of the cause of this unseemly merriment, her crossness was swallowed up in a whirlwind of passionate fury.

I must mention here that though Nancie Ruthven was nearly thirteen years old, she secretly loved and cherished a very pretty and most exquisitely-dressed wax doll, which Kitty had brought her once from a bazaar in a neighbouring town. This doll, however, who rejoiced in the name of Esther, had never been brought out in the presence of the boys, who, so far as Nancie knew, were unaware of its existence. Judge then of Nancie's mingled grief and rage to behold the hapless Esther—

totally undraped, and with her lovely soft hair all dusty and disarranged—suspended by a cord round her neck to one of the beams which ran across the roof, and being rapidly pulled up and down by Joe, while the other two boys made insulting remarks upon her person and appearance generally. Just as Nancie and Baby May entered, poor Esther came down with a run upon the floor, damaging her pretty face and nose irretrievably. Roy and Ted simultaneously seized her by the legs ; and then, whether by accident or design I cannot say, a sad accident took place. Roy held one leg, Ted held the other, and both pulled with all their might. Need I add that the unhappy Esther, whose skin was the thinnest of cotton, gave way suddenly, and the sawdust from her mangled body powdered the floor!

For one moment Nancie stood utterly speechless. Then rushing forward towards the grinning Joe, who was holding up his waxen victim by one limp, sawdustless leg, she struck him with her clenched fist square upon the nose, drawing blood immediately in the most scientific manner. Then seizing the maimed and disfigured Esther, she turned like a mad thing upon the two other boys—who were jeering and goading her on to further fury, as was their wont—and kicked their shins in a masterly and efficient style only achieved by long practice. This, of course, caused the boys to more active hostilities.

"Now, look here, Miss Spitfire," said Roy, seizing her wrists and holding her hands behind her back; "we told you, last time, what would happen if you kicked us again. So here goes!"

Nancie shrieked and kicked; while Baby May, weeping bitterly, hung on to Roy's leg and bit it—for to do her justice, she had not known who was to be the victim of the "execution" to which she had so gleefully bidden her sister. In a few minutes poor Nancie's arms were firmly tied behind her, and her feet tied together—regardless of her ear-piercing yells of impotent passion. Then—I regret to have to write this, but it is true—Ted and Joe held her, while Roy, with a pair of rusty old scissors, cut off her luxuriant hair close to her head! Blinks, at this awful climax, stopped giggling and screamed excited threats of telling Aunt Prue and Dick. Baby May pummelled the operator with all her tiny strength—but in vain. The ruthless scissors did their work only too well; the heap of dark brown locks upon the ground grew larger and larger; until at last Nancie, sobbing, shaking, and shrieking with fury, was set free. But what a Nancie! The boys, though slightly appalled at their handiwork, burst into fits of irrepressible laughter at the ludicrous little figure that stamped and panted, and poured out a flood of vindictive vituperation that would have done credit to any fish-wife ever born. Then, when she had exhausted her breath and her

vocabulary, she seized a flower-pot, flung it with all her might at Roy—fortunately it missed him—and flew like a miniature tornado into the house. Arrived there she made straight for the library, and rushed into the inner room. She forgot that Dick was very ill to-day, and that they had all been forbidden to disturb him; she forgot everything except her wrongs. Atkins had gone to the kitchen to have his long-delayed dinner, and Dick was quite alone. He was lying perfectly still on his bed; but even in her mad excitement Nancie saw that there was a strange, tense rigidity about his figure. His arms were flung upwards on the pillows, the hands clenched and bloodless; his breath was coming in deep labouring gasps, almost like sobs. But his face! As Nancie came nearer, she saw that it was drawn, and old-looking and of a ghastly whiteness, the eyes closed, the under-lip drawn back from the shut teeth as she had seen it only once before. With a cry of terror Nancie sprang towards him and seized his hand. For the moment she thought he was dying.

“Dick!” she cried in an agony, forgetting her troubles in her fears for him. “Oh, Dick—are you worse! Don’t look like that!”

He moved his head slightly; but he did not open his eyes.

“Go away,” he gasped inarticulately. “For God’s sake go away. Don’t speak to me.”

A strange awe fell upon Nancie ; the tears in her eyes were no longer tears of anger.

"Dick," she whispered, "can I do nothing ?"

But Dick did not answer.

Just then Atkins' heavy foot was heard in the corridor, and Nancie crept away, hiding behind the window-curtain until he had passed into his master's room and shut the door.

Then she went slowly upstairs, and shutting herself into an old disused lumber-room, she threw herself on the floor. And if grief be a luxury, then verily poor Nancie spent a luxurious afternoon.

CHAPTER XXII.

A SURPRISE PARTY.

"They looked about them with foolish eyes of amazement and indignation ; they wondered doubtless what the world was coming to."

IT was some hours later. Tea was over, and Kitty and Charteris were alone in the sunny, old-fashioned drawing-room. On the piano lay a pile of new songs, which Charteris had ordered down from London for his little *fiancée*. The piano was closed to-night, however ; for the drawing-room was comparatively near the library, and, as Kitty said, it seemed heartless to think of playing or singing when poor Dick was in such agony. The doctor had just gone, having been with his patient for the last two hours. The latter was easier now, but Dr. Bell looked very grave as he drove away. These terrible attacks were becoming alarmingly frequent of late, and left their victim each time weaker and more exhausted. Kitty watched the doctor's dog-cart skim round the corner of the avenue, then she turned away from the window with a heavy sigh. And as she did so Charteris

saw that her eyes were full of tears. He took her tenderly in his arms, and kissed her silently. Whereupon Kitty began to cry in a subdued way that touched her lover very much. He did not ask what was the matter ; for he knew quite well how deeply she cared for her cousin ; and he knew too, even better than she, what grave cause there was for anxiety in Dick's case. But he only held her gently in his arms, stroking back her hair at intervals, and letting her cry on—which she did for some time.

" You must think me very foolish and childish, Gerald," she said at last, raising her head and drying her eyes. " But you *don't* know how fond we all are of dear Dick ; and sometimes lately I have been afraid that—that he is getting worse, instead of better."

Gerald did not speak ; he tugged silently at his moustache, and stared out of the window.

" Do you think he seems worse now than when you were here last ? " asked Kitty, with a wistful upward look into her lover's face.

" I think he suff'rs more," said Charteris evasively. " To tell the truth, I should like another doctor to see him. Bell is a clever, painstaking fellow enough, I daresay ; but I think your cousin should have other advice. I know a fellow who was hurt just in a similar way two years ago—suffered awfully ; his people thought it was all up with him, and so did he. Well—

some new man, I can't remember his name, took him in hand, and, by Jove! I saw him a month ago, looking like a different fellow—able to go about, you know, and all that. He expects that with care, he'll soon be almost as fit as ever he was."

This was an unprecedently long speech for Charteris, and at its conclusion he looked rather exhausted.

"Oh, Gerald, *who* was the doctor?" exclaimed Kitty breathlessly. "Couldn't you write to your friend and ask him?"

"Wrote last night. Shall hear in the morning," was the laconic answer.

"Gerald—you dear old fellow, how good of you!"

She looked so pretty, with her sweet wet eyes, as she spoke, that Charteris instantly kissed her.

"I fancy, don't you know," he went on, when some trifling amenities had been exchanged, "that though Trevanion suffers so awfully, his spine may be less radically injured than we suppose. He told me yesterday, that he was so cut up at the time of the accident—when these London doctors told him his case was hopeless, you know—that he refused to have any advice afterwards but that of the old family doctor. Now, if there is any hope of his ultimate recovery, it seems a pity he shouldn't have every chance."

"Yes," assented Kitty sadly.

Some time elapsed. It was almost dark, when the sound of wheels was heard on the gravel outside, the hall door-bell sounded loudly, and a few moments later the drawing-room door opened, and Mr. and Mrs. Henniker were shown in. Kitty, whose hair was not in its usual state of neatness, advanced somewhat hurriedly to meet them. Ellen lit the lamps ; and then Kitty saw to her surprise that Mrs. Henniker wore her best green watered silk, cut low in front, that she had on pale lemon-coloured gloves, and had flowers in her hair. Kitty felt profoundly mystified ; for it was only on great occasions that the green watered silk appeared.

Hardly had Ellen left the room than the door-bell again rang, and Mr. and Mrs. Turner were ushered in with their two grown-up daughters, the latter respectively attired in pale maize and pale blue muslin. Mrs. Turner was in black satin and point lace ; Mr. Turner in orthodox evening-dress with a white flower in his button-hole.

Charteris, becoming aware from Kitty's face that there was something very far wrong (though what it was he had no idea), pulled himself together, and manfully did the agreeable to the two young ladies, while Mr. Turner and Mr. Henniker and their respective wives fraternized amicably. Ellen, who was not very tidy, owing to her having to undertake Sarah's duties as well as her own, now ushered in Mr. Robert Turner (the " Uncle Bob "

before alluded to), also in evening-dress and with a gardenia in his button-hole. He was followed by a bevy of young ladies and a fair sprinkling of young men, all in gala array. Each and all, after greeting the paralysed Kitty, cast a glance of politely-veiled surprise at her costume, which was simply a neatly-made blue serge, with linen collar and cuffs, and a smart little muslin bibbed apron.

The door-bell meanwhile kept ringing at intervals of a few seconds. Poor Kitty, murmuring something about Aunt Prue, hastened from the room, and encountered a fresh batch of arrivals in the hall.

What on earth could it all mean? thought the bewildered girl, as she sped swiftly upstairs in search of Aunt Prue.

Charteris, meanwhile, was doing wonders in the drawing-room. He hadn't the slightest idea why all these people had arrived suddenly upon the scene—neither, he saw, had Kitty. However, as they were there, they must be entertained, he supposed, and kept in a good humour until Aunt Prue came down. So he threw himself valiantly into the breach, exerting himself to be agreeable as he had rarely been known to do in the memory of man, with the result that every individual guest, especially the young ladies, thought him a most fascinating and altogether delightful personage. They wondered a little that he elected to wear morning-dress

at a gathering of this kind, but concluded that (being an earl's grandson) he ought to know, and certainly he was good-looking enough for anything. A pleasant buzz of talk and laughter filled the room, which was now quite crowded.

One of the Misses Turner had just consented to warble "At The Ferry," when Aunt Prue, in her black velvet gown and a white lace cap, sailed in, followed by the amazed and indignant Agatha. Dear, gentle, courteous Aunt Prue! No one could have guessed, from the sweet gracious dignity of her manner, that this impromptu assembly had taken her at all by surprise.

Charteris was now held in unwilling bondage by Hettie Dewhurst—a young lady with fashionably frizzed hair piled high on her head, a painfully brilliant complexion, and a most improbably small waist.

"We are *so* looking forward to your performance, Mr. Charteris," she said coquettishly, as Miss Turner rose from the piano amid subdued applause. "I'm sure it will be quite too exquisite for anything. You don't know how I *adore* the banjo! I think it is *quite* the instrument of the future."

"*My* performance! The *banjo!*" echoed Charteris, contracting his straight brows in a puzzled kind of way. "I—er—really, I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

Miss Dewhurst looked surprised in her turn.

"Why, we understood that you played the banjo," she

said in half-reproachful tones—"that it was quite a passion with you. And we certainly expected that you were to sing several comic songs to-night with banjo accompaniment. At least it said so on the card of invitation."

Charteris, for once, was thoroughly taken aback. He stared at his companion in blank amazement.

"Comic songs! Banjo accompaniment?" he repeated in a horrified way (for he considered the banjo, as an instrument, the lowest of the low). "I assure you, Miss—er—Dewhurst, I never sang a comic song in my life—never sang at all, in fact. I've no more voice than a crow. As for performing upon the *banjo!*—" He stopped, and made a gesture expressive of extreme disgust and contempt.

"How very extraordinary!" said Miss Dewhurst. "I can assure you that it was specially mentioned on the card."

"Ah! Would you mind telling me what else was on the card?" inquired Mr. Charteris after a pause, during which his companion decided that he was *quite* the handsomest man she had ever seen.

"I don't exactly remember," she said. "Just the usual thing, I think—that Miss Ruthven would be 'At Home' this evening (by the way, what a dear old lady she is!), and that Mr. Charteris, by special desire, would sing three comic songs, with banjo accompaniment."

"Heavens!" ejaculated the maligned Mr. Charteris, under his breath. Then aloud he added, "I can assure you there must be some mistake."

Just at this point Mr. Robert Turner approached them.

"Well, Mr. Charteris," he said, when he had greeted Miss Dewhurst, "so we are to have the pleasure of criticising your performance to-night, I understand."

"I have just been explaining to Miss Dewhurst that there is some mistake," said Charteris, rather stiffly. "I don't sing, nor do I play; and certainly I don't patronize the banjo."

Mr. Turner laughed.

"Oh, from all I hear, we are all going to patronize the banjo, now-a-days. I suppose if it's good enough for Royalty, it's good enough for us—eh?"

Charteris bowed slightly, and moved away with an air of haughty displeasure. As he crossed the room Mr. Henniker stopped him.

"By the way, Mr. Charteris," he said in his jovial voice, "I didn't know you were musical. You are to perform upon the banjo to-night, I understand."

Whereupon, I regret to say, Mr. Charteris made use—*sotto voce*—of a very strong expression regarding the banjo, and without further remark made his way towards Kitty, who had changed her serge frock for a distractingly becoming one of black lace, and was looking lovely, though intensely worried and anxious.

“Oh, Gerald, I was just looking for you,” she whispered despairingly. “Do come here.”

And she led the way to the schoolroom, and shut the door.

“Look here,” she said, producing from her pocket a square white card. “Several people have been speaking to me about your—your playing the *banjo*! And when I assured them you didn’t, they didn’t seem to believe me, and at last old Mr. Temple showed me *this*! What on earth the thing means, I don’t know.”

Charteris took the card she held out to him, and from it he had the felicity of learning that (as Miss Dewhurst had said) Miss Ruthven would be “At Home” on Saturday, from 7 to 10, and that by special desire Mr. Gerald Wilmington Charteris would sing three comic songs with banjo accompaniment.

Mr. Gerald Wilmington Charteris perused this pleasing document in silence. But he looked angry, which did not happen often.

“What on earth does it mean?” said poor Kitty in a piteous way. “*We* never sent out these cards. I suppose they have all had them. And oh, Gerald—you have no *idea* of the people who are here. Besides people we know, and who visit here occasionally, there are—there are actually ever so many of the Kelby shopkeepers! The very shoemaker down in the village is here—and the man and his wife who keep the public-

house at the cross-roads. Poor Aunt Prue is almost fainting. And oh, Gerald!—what we are to do about supper, or refreshments—I simply do not know!" And poor Kitty threw out her hands with a gesture of despair.

Charteris stood pulling at his moustache savagely for a minute or so. Then he said,

"Look here, Kitty. I believe this is nothing more or less than a disgusting practical joke on the part of your brothers. I have noticed them sniggering about in corners all this week. You see this card is written, not printed. My idea is that the young scoundrels have taken some card of invitation sent to me, and copied it. I remember now, one of them asking me what R.S.V.P. meant. Upon my soul, Kitty, I should enjoy giving all three a sound thrashing. When did the people get the cards? Did old Temple say?"

"Yesterday morning," was the almost inaudible answer. "Gerald—you *don't* think they would *dare*—the boys, I mean?"

Charteris laughed disagreeably.

"Dare?" he repeated, with significant emphasis. "Do you remember we noticed last night and this morning that they all ran to meet the postman?—and you said Roy must have been writing for specimens of moths, or caterpillars, or something? Depend upon it they were keeping back all the letters with the Kelby postmark—

knowing they would be the answers to these confounded cards. By Jove! the young fiends have devilry enough for anything!"

"And to-day, of all days," said Kitty in a distressed voice, looking as if she didn't quite know what to do with herself;—"when Dick is so ill, and cook is in bed, and Ellen so busy, and dirty, and cross. Oh, dear!" And Kitty stamped one little foot vigorously.

"Where are the boys?" asked Charteris shortly.

"Oh, I don't know. The last time I saw them they were in the tool-house, skinning a horrid dead cat." And Kitty shuddered.

"Well, I suppose we had better return to the scene of action," said Charteris drily, after a pause. "I shouldn't worry about refreshments, if I were you. Just have cake and wine handed round, you know, or anything," he added with masculine vagueness.

Kitty smiled faintly, and looked so desolately lovely that her lover took her in his arms, and kissed her pretty lips, deliberately, three times without stopping.

"Never mind," he said consolingly. "We'll pull through somehow. I only hope the row won't disturb Trevanion. I'll look in and see how he is. Now run away. And I say Kitty," he added, "you might explain, to such of the company as are worthy of notice that the banjo is *not* one of my idiosyncrasies."

"Oh, it is a *shame*!" cried Kitty in a passion of rage.

"And you, my dear, kind boy, you have been so good about it. I don't know what I should have *done* without you."

At this moment Blinks and Baby May—in great excitement and their Sunday frocks—burst into the room to know if they were "neat," and if they were to go into the drawing-room. (Nancie, in all the desolation of her shorn locks, was still secluded in the lumber-room, not having appeared even at tea-time.)

"Oh, go where you like," said Kitty distractedly, in answer to their clamorous entreaties.

And off they flew. Kitty followed (having been assured by Charteris that her eyes were not at all red), and Charteris himself went to Dick's room. The latter was much better, and had fallen asleep after tea. Naturally, however, his sleep had been of short duration.

"Is anything going on?" he asked, when he had responded to Charteris's greeting. "There seems a great commotion, somehow."

"Yes, there is rather a commotion," said the other languidly. Then he described the situation, and added his own surmises as to the projectors.

Dick frowned and looked annoyed.

"Those boys ought to be sent to a good public school," he said. "They are running wild here, with no one to control them."

"They ought to have a thundering good thrashing!"

returned Charteris, with unwonted temper. "And by Jove! they'll get it before they're much older, if they don't look out. Kitty is ready to cry with mortification, poor child—and no wonder. By the way, Trevanion, she is in a state in case the noise in the drawing-room should disturb you. You are sure you are feeling better?"

"Oh yes, I'm much easier now," was the quiet answer. "I've had rather a stiff time of it, though, since last night."

Charteris looked grave.

"I'll come in to-morrow," he said after a pause. "I want to have a serious talk with you."

"All right," Dick answered, with a faint smile. "I daresay I shall be in better trim for talking in the morning. Good-night, old fellow."

"Good-night," said the other with a warm clasp of the hand. "Glad you're feeling easier."

They had become great chums of late, these two, and mutually respected as well as liked each other—which is a great thing in friendship.

Charteris returned to the drawing-room, where he found that quite half the guests had already gone—not caring, presumably, to be greeted on terms of equality by the tradespeople of Kelby and the surrounding districts. Besides, it had begun to leak out that the whole affair was a hoax which discovery

caused mingled indignation and amusement. The remaining guests, having partaken of a slight—a very slight refreshment (solemnly handed round by Atkins), shortly afterwards took their leave—with the exception of Mr. and Mrs. Henniker, who remained to console the now almost hysterical Aunt Prue. A consultation was then held as to what should be done with the abandoned youths to whose ingenuity (as all present were pretty well persuaded) they owed the evening's entertainment. The culprits had been seen at intervals hanging about the staircase and passages in company with Master Turner (so ran the testimony of Ellen and Atkins), but had wisely refrained from coming fully into view.

Mr. Henniker, having faithfully promised Aunt Prue that he would spread the true origin of this heterogeneous gathering during his parochial visits, asked her permission to call upon the morrow between services and interview the Masters Ruthven, who were now, Kitty reported, sound asleep in bed. Poor Aunt Prue gladly gave the good-hearted clergyman full authority to deal with the offenders entirely according to his discretion—and punish them, if necessary.

Charteris heard this with satisfaction, and savagely wished the same permission had been accorded to him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DICK'S DARK HOUR.

"What is it in suffering that makes man and beast long for loneliness? I think it is an unknown something, more and deeper and nearer than self, calling out of solitude, 'Come to me! Come!' How little of the tenderness that human hearts need, and after which, consciously or unconsciously they hunger, do we give or receive? The cry of the hurt heart for solitude seems to me the call of the heart of God."

George Macdonald.

MR. HENNIKER interviewed the boys next day, and talked to them very seriously. He spoke of the annoyance their foolish practical joke had caused Aunt Prue and many others. He pointed out the unpleasant consequences that might ensue, and that very likely would ensue. He alluded to the ungentlemanliness of the whole thing. His words, however, had simply no effect upon his listeners, who appeared to be full of repressed glee at the success of their wicked "joke." And when Mr. Henniker hinted that he had full permission from their aunt to chastise them severely, they muttered defiantly that "they should like to see him try it," and in another minute were out of the room and out of sight for the rest of the day.

In the afternoon Charteris had a long talk with Dick, anent his seeing the "new man," Dr. Graham, of whom Charteris had spoken to Kitty. This, however, Dick obstinately refused to do.

"I know quite well my case is hopeless, Charteris," he said quietly; "and I had rather be left in peace, and not pulled about by any more doctors—I had enough of that at first. But thank you all the same," he added with a faint smile; "it's very good of you to bother."

Kitty was both grieved and disappointed at Dick's determination, and tried with many coaxing ways after Charteris left him, to persuade her cousin only to *see* Dr. Graham—just once. But Dick, gentle as he was, could be singularly and almost provokingly obstinate at times; and Kitty, seeing he was in earnest, gave up her entreaties, and sat beside him silently and thoughtfully for a long time. He was dressed and lying on the sofa to-day; but he still looked frightfully ill, and he had an air of languid depression, too, which was very unusual with him.

"Dear Dick, how awfully white and exhausted you always look after one of your terribly bad days," she said, looking at him anxiously and affectionately, as the late afternoon sun streamed in on his worn haggard face.

"Yes, I daresay," he answered absently. Then with a somewhat abrupt change of tone he went on, "Charteris is a good fellow, Kitty. You ought both to be very happy."

Kitty blushed a lovely rose-colour. She murmured some unintelligible reply, and began industriously to pleat the frills which adorned her pretty muslin gown.

Dick lay silent for some time, watching the black-birds as they stalked solemnly about the sun-kissed lawn. Something in the sad expression of his eyes, in his helpless attitude, touched strong, happy, beautiful Kitty with a sharp sense of pity and pain.

"Ah, Dick," she said, with a break in her pretty voice, "you don't know how dreadful it makes me feel sometimes, when I realize how often I am discontented, and impatient, and *abominably* selfish—though my life is so utterly blessed and happy, and when I think how terrible life is for you, so full of pain and weariness and disappointment—and yet you bear it all so patiently and uncomplainingly—"

"Oh, my dear child," he interrupted her with a touch of impatience in his deep voice, "you little know—any of you—how different I am from what you all seem to imagine me. If you think I am never deadly sick of lying here—never fiercely intolerant of my useless, maimed body, and broken, empty life, you are very, very far wrong. God knows I try to bear it well; but the effort is too often a sad failure."

"Oh, Dick, it isn't!" she cried earnestly. "You don't know what a help and comfort you are to us all—and how we all love you. If you ever feel fretful or im-

patient, we never see it, or know it. You are always the same dear loving patient Dick to us. Why, Dick, we *couldn't* do without you now—don't you know that?"

"You are all very good to me," he said after a pause. "And I suppose I am ungrateful to feel sometimes that I am not sorry—that the end must come—soon."

The last few words were spoken half to himself; but in his voice there throbbed such an uncontrollable, passionate longing, that Kitty was shocked and startled.

"Hush," she said unsteadily, "oh, hush, Dick! Don't—please don't say that. You will get well by-and-bye. You *must*—" She stopped, and winked away the tears that suddenly filled her eyes.

"I shall not get well, Kitty," he answered quietly.

"Dick—how strange your eyes look! One would almost think you were—*glad!*" she whispered, with a quivering lip.

Dick smiled—a strange, far-away smile.

"Life—to me—is not so attractive that I should cling to it," he said.

His tone was so hopeless, so full of quiet acceptance of pain and suffering, that Kitty could have cried.

"You had better go away, Kitty," he went on wearily. "I am not fit company for anyone to-day."

Now, it was very rarely that Dick ever indulged in moods of this sort. Certainly not one of his cousins had ever seen him in one before. But alas! while we are

mortal, the body must act on the spirit; and to-day Dick was exhausted mentally and physically by the terrible bodily suffering he had undergone; for this last attack had been an unusually severe one. Given almost constant sickness and anguish of body, occasional sickness and anguish of heart are all but inevitable. Besides —though Dick Trevanion was no sentimental fool—there were times when the image of the girl he had so loved and trusted—the girl who was to have been his wife—came back to him in a fierce almost maddening passion of love and regret and pain. He had borne the breaking of his engagement and the news of his former *fiancée's* subsequent marriage so silently that few guessed what it had really cost him; for with him emotions were deep and lasting. It had been cruelly hard upon him, you see. Where other men might have dominated thought and memory in hard work mental or physical, or in the hundred and one distractions open to a strong and active man—Dick's only occupation for months after his accident, was to lie and think—think continually, in the intervals of cruel bodily torture. The thought that the woman who so short a time ago had been *his*—only his—was now the wife of another man, was inexpressibly bitter to him. He could have borne it better, he used to think, if she had waited—only a little while—before giving herself to a new lover. It seemed so cruelly, horribly soon. Things cut deeper when we don't talk of

them, I think; and Dick had had some very dark desolate hours in these first weary months of his helplessness. Even now, he was at times the victim of an almost unbearable depression and heart-sickness; and to-day his powers of fortitude and self-repression were at their lowest ebb. I think Kitty understood this; for she felt her heart overflowing with love and compassion for him. She did not go away, however, though he had asked her.

"Are you faint, Dick?" she said softly, after a minute or two, seeing how strangely white he had grown.
"Shall I give you a little wine?"

He made a slight gesture of assent; and Kitty rose quickly, and went to the side-table. She came back with a glass of wine in her hand, and gently raising his head on her arm, held the glass to his lips.

"Let me bathe your forehead and hands, Dick," she said, when he had lain with closed eyes for a little time. "Here is the Eau de Cologne; Aunt Prue says it is such a good thing if one is faint. I will get a handkerchief from your room."

Dick pressed her hand gratefully; and with the deftest possible touch she bathed his forehead and hands, smoothing back his thick hair at intervals with her little cool fingers. While this was going on Charteris came in.

"I have had a horrible fit of the blues," said Dick with quite a cheerful smile; "and Kitty has been charming

it away. You will have a perfect little wife, Charteris. I almost envy you."

Charteris smiled upon his little bride-to-be, without a spark of jealousy; which showed that he was a very sensible young man indeed.

What? you say, he could hardly be jealous of a helpless invalid! Oh, couldn't he? Men in love, are not, as a rule, distinguished by common sense—and a man in love can be jealous of anything. I once knew a man who couldn't bear to see his *fiancée* kiss or caress a little kitten of which she was very fond. I think he was quite right, myself; but that is neither here nor there.

"Where is Nancie?" asked Dick suddenly, when the handkerchief and Cologne bottle had retired into oblivion. "I haven't seen her since the day before yesterday."

Kitty's face grew troubled.

"The poor child has been crying herself almost sick all to-day and yesterday," she answered unwillingly. "I can't get her to come downstairs. The boys—oh, Dick, I don't know what you will say—but they have cut off her hair quite close to her head!"

"Cut off her hair!" repeated Dick in horrified tones, half raising himself on his arm as he spoke.

"Upon my soul, these lads do want wheeling into line!" exclaimed Charteris wrathfully, rising from his chair in a less leisurely manner than usual. "By Jove! they stop at nothing. Poor little woman—I wondered where she was all to-day."

"Where are the boys?" asked Dick abruptly.

"I don't know," answered Kitty, with a little shrug of her shoulders. "They weren't in at dinner-time. I suppose you have heard of the dreadful 'surprise party' last night?"

"Yes," was the rather curt answer.

"Mr. Henniker spoke to them very seriously this forenoon," went on Kitty; "but they didn't seem to care a single bit, he said. So we have decided to send them to Coventry. We shall not—*any* of us—take the slightest notice of them until they apologize."

"Much they will care for that," observed Dick briefly.

"They will care if *you* don't speak to them, Dick," said Kitty, with a convincing little nod of her head. "And at all events it is the only way we can punish them until Uncle John comes."

So it was decided that the delinquents were to be "sent to Coventry." They were to remain ignored and unnoticed; their remarks unanswered, their requests disregarded—until such time as they chose to apologize. And though at first they pretended that they "didn't care a button," after a time they became conscious that it was a very unpleasant state of things indeed. For one thing, Kitty refused to help them with the preparation of their lessons—which defection on her part earned them endless whippings at school; Dick took no more notice of them than if they had been pieces of furniture, and everyone

in the house pursued a similar course. Even Nancie, fortified by the united assurances of Dick, Kitty, and Charteris, to the effect that short hair was both fashionable and becoming, seemed deaf to their jeers at her altered appearance. So after a time the young men felt that this ignoring of their personality was becoming monotonous. They were in turn sullenly resentful, vindictive, and at last undisguisedly repentant. But this last frame of mind they kept to themselves.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A DISASTER AND AN ARMISTICE.

"Something I heard in the darkness fall,
And for a moment my blood grew chill.
I spoke in a whisper, as one who speaks
In a room where someone is lying dead.
But he made no answer to what I said."

Longfellow.

BABY MAY was now the ostracised young men's only friend in the household; for to her—being a happy-go-lucky young person—their being in disgrace was a matter of little or no moment.

One wet Saturday afternoon, exactly a week after the surprise party, Roy and Ted had gone out, regardless of the weather, to gallop William of Orange alternately round the meadow. Joe, who had burnt his foot rather severely with hot sealing-wax, remained indoors, and condescended to join Baby May in a madly-exciting game long ago christened "Lollops," which consisted in sliding upon trays in a swift and forcible manner from the top to the bottom of the broad oak staircase. While resting temporarily from this recreation, they

were joined by Blinks, with a much larger tray, which was at once seized by Joe ; and after a short squabble, the game went on again more spiritedly than ever. Charteris had already come out twice from the library—where he and Kitty were sitting with Dick—to languidly request them to “stop that abominable row.” He now appeared again ; but his remarks were treated as before—that is to say no one took the slightest notice of them. At last, however, exhausted nature gave out, and the competitors recruited themselves by hanging over the stair-railings and fishing with a noosed string for a heap of beasts out of Noah’s ark, which lay in the hall below. This was a deeply absorbing occupation, which did not pall for at least an hour. At the end of that time Roy and Ted returned, cross, hungry, and wet, and scattered Noah, his sons, and their attendant animals to the four corners of the hall ; whereupon Joe and Blinks charged wrathfully downstairs, and a regular row followed, which was quelled by the sudden and unexpected appearance upon the scene of Uncle John.

The boys, after a rather embarrassed greeting to their elderly relative, sheepishly took themselves off, and were seen no more until tea-time. During that meal Baby May announced solemnly,

“ All the boys have been naughty ! ”

“ Hold your tongue, Baby May,” said Joe sullenly.

“ But they *have* ! ” continued the small informer.

"They told people to come with their party-clothes on—and too they cut off *all* Nancie's hair! And that's why Nancie can't come down." And Baby May paused, quite out of breath.

"Eh!—eh! What—what—" said Uncle John, who had not been previously informed of his nephews' latest delinquencies.

There was a dead silence.

"Have the boys been disobedient, Prue?" went on Uncle John with a portentous frown. "What does the child mean about a party—eh? And about Nancie? Why, where *is* Nancie?"

"Well, John, as Baby May has mentioned it, I must tell you that the boys have been most unruly, and have grieved me very, very much," said Aunt Prue with nervous severity.

"I'm sorry to hear that, boys," said Uncle John, adjusting his eye-glasses, and surveying the culprits with a very stern face. "I shall speak to you in the schoolroom after tea."

After tea, accordingly, Mr. Dornton having been put in possession of the facts concerning last Saturday's performances, administered to all three boys an unpleasantly severe thrashing, and sent the recipients thereof to bed. They did not go to bed, however, but sat in a sullen group in the seclusion of their own room, concocting spitefully revengeful plans for the undoing of

Charteris, who, for some unexplained reason, they perversely chose to consider the mainspring of all their misfortunes.

The result of these plans was that Charteris—preparing to descend the stairs some hours later—caught his foot in a string stretched across for the purpose, and fell headlong to the foot of the staircase. A subdued chuckling from the first landing revealed the perpetrators of this time-worn joke. The chuckling, however, ceased after a time—for Mr. Charteris still remained prone on the floor of the hall.

For quite a minute dead silence reigned. Then, in the dim light, Roy craned his neck stealthily over the railings. But he drew it back again almost immediately, his face rather pale.

“I say,” he said in a queer voice, “what’s the matter with him? He’s lying quite still!”

A breathless pause ensued; then all three tiptoed slowly downstairs, and surrounded their fallen foe. To their horror blood was flowing from a small wound in his forehead, which had struck against the sharp corner of the stair. His left arm was doubled under him in a stiff, unnatural way; his eyes were closed; his face quite white. The boys felt seriously alarmed, and horribly uncomfortable.

“He’s hurt,” said Ted, in a scared kind of way.
“We’d better tell Aunt Prue.”

"I told you how it would be," said Joe (who, however, had been the principal instigator).

Just at this moment Kitty came across the hall.

"Good gracious, boys, what's the matter?" she said hurriedly. "Oh Gerald, what is it?—are you hurt?"

"He's fallen downstairs," Roy proceeded awkwardly to explain.

Joe, meanwhile, hastened upstairs to remove the fatal string.

Kitty flung herself upon her knees beside the still unconscious Charteris, exclaiming piteously,

"Oh, go for Uncle John! Tell them to get the doctor. Oh—he's dead—he's dead!"

Ted ran to bring Uncle John, who, with Atkins' help, carried Charteris to his room. He moaned slightly as they lifted him, but he did not regain consciousness.

When Dr. Bell arrived (which he did very speedily) he pronounced the patient's left arm to be broken, and the wound on the head to be a very "nasty" one.

Charteris opened his eyes when his arm was set, and tried to sit up, weakly declaring himself "all right." Dr. Bell, however, issued stern orders that he was to keep his bed until he saw him again.

The culprits, being satisfied that their victim was still alive, had retired to get ready for bed, feeling very guilty and conscience-stricken.

"Of course he'll tell Uncle John," observed Ted

gloomily, as he pulled off his stockings with deliberate care.

"Oh, of course," assented Roy, who had not begun to undress, and who, truth to tell was feeling rather dismayed at the result of this last escapade.

"I hope he won't *die!*" said Joe, under his breath.

"Pooh! not he!" put in Ted. "A fall couldn't kill a fellow."

"Don't you be too sure," returned Roy significantly. "You remember old Turner's sister. *She* killed herself falling downstairs."

A dead silence followed this remark, broken by Ted, who said,

"Oh, a woman! But men aren't so easily killed."

"Oh, you would wonder," was Roy's brief reply.

Then the remorseful young men put out the candle, and got into bed.

Dr. Bell came in the morning, and pronounced Charteris to be going on favourably, but decreed that for that day at least he was to keep his bed. On the following afternoon, however, the invalid came downstairs, looking very white and weak, and even more languid than usual. The boys—who had been waiting in painful uncertainty for the inevitable thrashing which they felt uncomfortably sure they both deserved and would get—began to wonder, as the days went on, and nothing happened; whether it could be possible that

Charteris had not "told." It seemed as though he had not, for Kitty was even gentler and sweeter to them than was her wont, and Uncle John (having forgiven and tipped them after the last thrashing as usual) treated them with his usual jovial *bonhomie*.

I must mention, by the way, that a lumbering apology had been made to Aunt Prue, and in accordance with this the "sending to Coventry" had been repealed. They had also "made it up" with Dick, and all three had had a long talk with him, confessing their latest misdemeanour, of which, to their surprise, they found he had been in total ignorance.

Charteris, they had carefully avoided as much as possible. After their interview with Dick, however, they held a council of war in the tool-house, at which it was decided that Charteris had evidently *not* "told;" and that if he knew the share the boys had had in his misfortune it was "awfully decent" of him to keep it to himself, and that if he didn't know, it would be only "the thing" to tell him. Accordingly a laudable resolution was moved, seconded, and passed, to the effect that an apology should be made to him without delay—as Dick had suggested. Immediately after which (in order, presumably, that their resolution might not have time to cool) all three adjourned to the drawing-room, where Charteris—alone, and with his arm in a sling—was lazily perusing a sporting newspaper. He looked up with a few

languid words as they entered, and they, seized with a sudden and unwonted fit of shyness, wandered aimlessly about the room until Charteris, whose head was aching a good deal, heartily wished them far enough.

At last—after kicking down the fire-irons, knocking over one of the small tables, and pulling the blinds up and down once or twice in a maddeningly irritating way—they came to a stand before Charteris, and Roy, stimulated by vigorous nudges from his brothers, spoke with great lucidity as follows,

“I say, Mr. Charteris, we want to tell you—I mean, you know, we’re sorry about you falling downstairs the other night.”

Here the orator paused, and shuffled his feet about awkwardly.

Charteris, in a quiet voice, intimated that the affair had not given him any appreciable amount of pleasure either.

“And,” blurted out Joe, all in a hurry, “we want to tell you—that’s to say if you don’t know already—that we stretched the string at the top of the stairs on purpose for you to trip over!”

Charteris was lying back in his chair, regarding his future brothers-in-law with a slightly quizzical look in his dark blue eyes.

“So I imagined,” he said quietly.

“Then—why didn’t you let it out?” asked Tcd, surveying him with mingled curiosity and admiration.

"We didn't tell tales out of school when I was a lad," was the nonchalant answer. "Just hand me that paper-knife, Joe, will you? Thanks."

"Then, look here!" burst out Roy, getting very red, and speaking very fast—"if you knew we had been cads enough to do a thing like that, on the top of all the other things we'd done—and never said a word to Uncle John, or Aunt Prue, or Kitty, or anyone, I just want to say it's uncommonly decent of you ; and for my part I'm jolly sorry I ever made a fool of you—I mean played tricks or that—and I'm sure Ted and Joe will say the same."

"Yes, we do," mumbled the other two confusedly.

"All right, boys, shake hands," said Charteris in his lazy, good-natured voice.

And, this ceremony having been performed, the three got themselves out of the room, feeling uncommonly relieved, and exceedingly warm.

From that day forth Charteris was by them regarded with a considerable accession of respect, and no further practical jokes disturbed his peace of mind.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE COMING SHADOW.

“ ‘ Dear God,’ she cried, ‘ and must we see
All blissful things depart from us, or ere we go to Thee ?
We cannot guess Thee in the wood—or hear Thee in the wind,
Our cedars must fall round us, ere we see the light behind !
Ay—sooth—we feel too strong in weal to need Thee on the road—
But woe being come—the soul is dumb, that crieth not on God ! ’ ”

Mrs. Browning.

IT was now autumn. Both Charteris and Uncle John had gone, and things were going on much as usual. Agatha was more enamoured of parish work than ever. Mr. Endicott had returned from Zambesi in delicate health ; and was now in lodgings in the village with his only sister, a rather strong-minded young woman some years older than Agatha. A great friendship had been struck up between the two girls ; indeed Agatha spent most of her time with Miss Endicott, who found her a most enthusiastic coadjutor.

As for the boys, whether they were getting wiser, whether their last escapade had sobered them, or whether Dick’s judiciously applied counsels had taken

effect, I cannot tell you. I fancy the latter. Certainly they were very much improved.

Meanwhile Dick himself was becoming appreciably weaker. Terrible days—aye, and nights too—of cruel pain, left him too exhausted and nervous to see or speak to anyone. He was less able, too, to fight against the depression of which I have spoken, and which at times was all but intolerable. Nancie, who, as we know, in her queer childish way loved him passionately, noticed his changed appearance with growing fear. A terrible dread assailed her that perhaps Dick might be going to die! This thought haunted her day and night, until the child's anxiety really began to affect her health.

Kitty and Aunt Prue, too, were seriously alarmed, and at last persuaded the invalid to consent to see Dr. Graham "some time soon." Agatha was too much taken up with her Endicotts, and the idea of by-and-bye accompanying Miss Endicott to China as a missionary, to think of much beyond these absorbing interests. But Kitty, who was never too much occupied to neglect those she loved, wrung from Dick one night, when he was feeling very ill, a promise that he would see Dr. Graham at once.

Accordingly Kitty wrote off that very night to Charteris, asking him in her impulsive way to send or bring Dr. Graham as speedily as possible, for she was

sure Dick was very much worse. The result of which was that Charteris and Dr. Graham came down one Friday afternoon, and the latter had a long interview with Dick, and afterwards with Aunt Prue. Mr. Trevanion—he said frankly, in answer to the old lady's anxious questions—was in a very critical state. As matters stood, the probabilities were that his life would be one of a few months at longest. He (Dr. Graham) had given an immense deal of study to similar cases, and his suggestion was that he should take the sick man abroad for a certain time, and treat him after a particular system of his own. It was a forlorn hope, he acknowledged—nay more, it was a case of kill or cure—but in his opinion it was a risk worth running. Mr. Trevanion, he was sorry to say, seemed indifferent either way.

Nevertheless, after a good deal of talking and persuasion, Dick consented ; but, he obstinately insisted, he would not go until the spring. Privately, he had not much faith in his recovery ; and yet, of late the old morbid distaste of existence had left him ; and a feverish desire to live—to be as other men were—possessed him almost constantly, and made patience and resignation almost unattainable virtues.

On the evening of the day of Dr. Graham's visit, the boys, after looking for Nancie all over the house—for they were in an impish mood, and thirsted to torment

someone who would repay the amusement—found her curled up on a heap of flower-pots in a corner of the tool-house, crying bitterly. Baby May, with round pitying eyes, stood beside her, drying her beloved Nancie's tears with a very small and very dirty pocket-handkerchief.

"Hallo, Spitfire! what's the row?" inquired Roy, jocosely, administering a severe pull to his sister's short dark hair, which looked wilder than ever in its owner's grief.

Nancie looked up; what with her swollen eyes, and the application of Baby May's grimy handkerchief, she was a very pitiful-looking little object.

"Oh, boys," she sobbed in an awestruck kind of way, quite forgetting to resent Roy's indignity to her hair, "Dick is going to *die!*"

"And be an angel!" added Baby May with sad solemnity.

"What!" exclaimed a shocked chorus. "How do you know? Did that new doctor say so? I say, Nancie, you don't mean it?"

"Yes, I do!" wailed Nancie, getting up from her lowly seat on the flower-pots. "I heard Dr. Graham speaking to Aunt Prue, and he said Dick couldn't live more than—than a few months."

"Oh, I say!" said the boys blankly.

"I knew he was far too good"—wept poor Nancie,

casting herself down on the flower-pots again—"always ! Oh, what shall I do ?—I wish I could die too !"

The boys stood silent and awestruck. Of course they did not cry ; but they felt the same unruly and inconvenient lumps in their throats that they had felt when Baby May had scarlet fever.

Somehow, they could not imagine the house, now, without Dick. It seemed to them all as if he had always been there—that it was impossible they could do without him. And as a matter of fact the whole family had got into the way of depending upon him so thoroughly, though perhaps unconsciously, as the one unfailing sympathizer in all their troubles and perplexities—aye, and pleasures too—that they could hardly realize that a year ago he was little more than a name to them. And wild boys and girls though they were still (the younger members of the family I mean), there was certainly a difference in their behaviour now, and their behaviour a year ago. The change was not startling, perhaps, and not noticeable from day to day—but it was there. Dick never "preached ;" he never set himself up as a mentor, a saint, or a martyr ; there was no faintest tinge of the "goody-goody" about him ; but there was a simple manliness about his character, and a certain nobility about his life—circumscribed as that life was—which could hardly fail to influence those around him, though perhaps neither he nor they were aware of it.

For several days after this conversation with Nancie, the boys felt wretched. They wandered in and out of Dick's room ; they hung about him, and kept asking him continually if he felt better ; they piled coals on the fire with reckless liberality (having a vague idea that he ought to be kept as warm as possible) until the room was like an oven ; they had the blinds up and down twenty times a day ; and quarrelled for the privilege of riding to Kelby for his medicine.

Blinks and Baby May persistently made toast for him—under the mistaken impression that he liked it (which he didn't)—and took off his slippers times without number and with indefatigable zeal, for the purpose of warming them. As for Nancie, except during school hours, she scarcely ever left him.

Dick felt singularly touched by the loving care and anxiety of these hitherto wild little creatures. Their often clumsy, though well-meaning efforts to help to take care of him, to relieve his suffering and weariness, to amuse and please him, lightened his burden of pain and weakness to a marvellous degree, and never worried or annoyed him, as it might have done some invalids. And they always felt that their efforts were recognised and appreciated. Dick was never too ill to thank them, or to smile upon them ; no impatient words ever fell from his lips ; and even after his most terrible attacks of pain, whenever he was a shade better, he was always

ready to be taken into the family councils again, to be everybody's confidant—in short to put himself in the background entirely.

One day when he had been worse than usual, he told Aunt Prue he should like to see Dr. Graham again. She wrote off at once; and the following forenoon Dr. Graham arrived. Dick was very weak that day, and the interview was a somewhat long one.

A day or two later it became known in the household that "Dick was going away with the new doctor." To Nancie this was only second to Dick dying, for she felt miserably certain he would never come back. She cried herself to sleep night after night, and prayed passionately—poor little soul—that Dick might neither die nor go away.

One night when the prospect of life without Dick seemed specially dreary and desolate, she had been lying awake for a long time. It was a wet stormy night, and she could hear the rain beating pitilessly and continuously against the window. The sobbing, wailing sound of the wind made her shudder, and echoed in her ears even when she buried her head under the bed-clothes. Things had gone wrong with Nancie to-day, since the early morning. She had been rude to Aunt Prue, quarrelled with Agatha, and slapped poor little Baby May. Then she had, as usual, rushed in a fever of grief and repentance to Dick, to

accuse herself of being the "wickedest girl in the world," and make a hundred good resolutions for the future. What should she do, the child wondered miserably, without Dick to help her to try to be good, and encourage her when she failed? How tenderly and wisely he had always advised her, and comforted her, and understood her! As she tossed and turned about, with wide eyes and throbbing temples, an idea entered her mind, and swiftly took possession of her. If this doctor took her cousin away, why might not she, Nancie, go with them? Dick would certainly want someone with him besides the doctor and Atkins. And who loved him better than she did? This idea fired her imagination to such an extent that she felt more wide-awake and restless than ever, and after lying for some time longer she got up, put on her dressing-gown, and went softly downstairs, with the intention of gaining Dick's consent to the plan at once. She might not have a chance of seeing him again alone, for he would be gone in less than a week. She was almost sure he would not be asleep—and if he were, she would not wake him.

But she was doomed to disappointment; for Dick was asleep, thanks to a sleeping-draught ordered by Dr. Graham. If Atkins had known Nancie was there, he would have made very short work of her indeed. However, as he did not know, she stood unmolested and shivering,

just inside Dick's bedroom door. All was still. As Nancie looked at her cousin's sleeping face, her heart sank. The change in him had never struck her so forcibly as now. Even her childish eyes could see how very, very ill he looked, how sadly changed even from the Dick of six months ago.

She crept nearer, her eyes dim with tears. She remembered that other night—when Baby May was ill—how gentle and kind he had been to her. She remembered how she had knelt beside him, and prayed that God might not let Baby May die. And God had *not* let her die! Perhaps He would save Dick, if she asked Him here, and now. Noiselessly Nancie knelt down in the darkened room, and whispered a passionately incoherent petition that "her darling Dick might not die, and that she might be allowed to go with him when he went away with the new doctor."

Dick stirred and moaned in his uneasy sleep ; but he did not awake. In the stillness Nancie seemed to hear his voice, like the echo of his voice that other night many months ago,

" My Nancie, can you not trust God to take care of Baby May ? "

Surely God would take care of Dick too ! And the thought brought strange comfort to her sore little heart. She rose from her knees with a sobbing sigh, and carefully and lovingly drew the bed-clothes over Dick's arm,

which was flung out on the counterpane. Then she laid her lips with the lightest possible touch on the thin white fingers, and sped swiftly and noiselessly away.

As

CHAPTER XXVI.

THOSE THAT WERE LEFT.

"When some loved voice that was to you
Both sound and sweetness, saileth suddenly ;
And silence, against which you dare not cry,
Aches round you like a strong disease and new—
What hope ? What help ? What music will undo
That silence to your sense?"

Mrs. Browning.

IT was nearly a week later. Dick had gone with Dr. Graham to some distant German watering-place. Nancie, I need hardly say, had *not* been allowed to accompany them. Dick, in a few brief gentle words had explained to her why, and she was resigned. But oh ! how she missed him !

Indeed every member of the family missed him in their own particular way. And among the younger members each—with the exception of Baby May—privately resolved to turn over a new leaf, so that when he returned (for none of them save Nancie ever allowed themselves for a moment to contemplate the possibility of his *not* returning) he should

find them no longer "The Wild Ruthvens." But—to Nancie especially—it was very uphill work.

Dr. Graham wrote every week, and his letters were so cheerful and hopeful that Kitty declared they were worth more than their weight in gold. And so the days went on, Christmas came and went, and at the end of January Charteris and Kitty were married. It was a very pretty wedding, though a very quiet one, and everything went off most satisfactorily. Among the presents (one and all of which were pronounced "stunning" by the bride's brothers) was an exquisite diamond bracelet from Dick, with a tiny pencilled note from the donor, wishing Kitty and her bridegroom all loving good wishes. During the wedding ceremony the boys looked rather subdued; for they had not realized until to-day what it would be to lose their beloved Kitty. Indeed, if their sex had not rendered them superior to such unmanly weakness, they would probably have followed Aunt Prue's example, and cried heartily. They were spared this humiliation, however, and recovering rapidly, more than distinguished themselves at the wedding breakfast. Kitty looked simply lovely; Charteris looked languidly handsome and tranquil, as usual.

At last it was over; the final farewells were all said; and the bride and bridegroom drove away—away into "that new world which is the old."

In the afternoon, when all the guests had dispersed, and Aunt Prue and Agatha had retired to indulge in a few supplementary tears, Roy, who had been restlessly wandering up and down the house, wishing Charteris had never been born, came to an anchor in the library. This room had been, with one consent, shunned by the family since Dick's departure. It had a strangely cold and desolate look. The sight of Dick's empty sofa gave them all a keen sense of loss and pain.

As Roy entered, he saw that Nancie was huddled up on the hearthrug before the fireless grate, her pretty silk frock crushed carelessly under her, her face stained with tears.

"Hallo, Nancie!" he said, seating himself on the sofa, and regarding the forlorn little figure with gloomy curiosity. "What's up now? Crying? Well—I don't wonder. Dear old Kits! I'm sure I wish to goodness Charteris had never seen her. And yet, you know, he's a decent kind of fellow too, when you get to know him."

There was a long silence; then Nancie said, after drying her eyes, and smoothing back her hair,

"Roy, I want to ask you something."

"All right, go ahead."

"I wanted to say," went on Nancie in a quavering voice, "that I've been trying so hard lately to be good-tempered, and nice, and—and jolly—like Kitty. And please, Roy, will you and the others—if you will only ask

me to do things as you used to ask her—I do so want to be like her."

"Well, you know," answered Roy, with brotherly frankness, "I don't think you'll ever be the least bit like Kitty, if you try till you're blue—and so I just tell you plainly. For one thing, you know," he added somewhat cruelly, "you're not nearly so pretty."

"No, I know," acquiesced poor Nancie humbly.

"But," continued Roy, with the air of one making a handsome concession, "of course that's not your fault. And I, for one, don't mind you doing things for me, if you like—anything you *can* do. Of course I don't expect you'll do them as well as Kitty, you know."

"No," said Nancie very earnestly—"but I would try ever so hard."

"All right," returned Roy with his most lordly air. "You'll have to be less of a spitfire, you know."

"Yes, I know," sighed Nancie. "And, Roy," she added tremulously after a minute, "*would* you mind not speaking about—about me not being pretty? You don't know how dreadful it makes me feel." And her great dark eyes filled with tears.

"Pooh! why should it?" was the contemptuous answer.

"I don't know. But it *does*."

"Oh well, that's because you're such a little goose. It doesn't matter a rap. And really you know, Nancie,"

he continued, surveying her critically, "sometimes—just now, for instance, when your face is kind of red, and your eyes shining—you don't look half so bad. In that frock now, really you look very well. You remind me—something—of Kitty."

"Roy!" breathlessly—"do you think so?"

"Fact!" announced her brother with an emphatic nod. "But don't go and get conceited because I said that, you know. It's not often you look the least bit in the world pretty. Heigho! It seems too bad that we should lose both Kitty and Dick at once. I wish the dear old fellow was here again. He had a way of explaining things, and understanding a fellow's feelings, and making a fellow feel ashamed of doing anything not straight, you know—that was—that was kind of nice," concluded Roy somewhat lamely, his eloquence failing him suddenly.

"Roy," said Nancie almost in a whisper, "do you think he will ever—will ever come back?"

"Of course he will. Why shouldn't he?"

"He may—he may *die!*" said Nancie, trying to wink back her tears.

"Oh no," answered Roy quickly; "not now that Graham has taken him in hand."

But his boyish face grew grave, and he didn't speak again for a few minutes. Certain words of Dick's had floated into his mind regarding Nancie,

and her treatment by her brothers. Dick had said, in fact, that no true gentleman ever wantonly teased or made fun of girls or women. It had begun to dawn on Roy of late that a good many things habitual to himself and his brothers were *not* characterized by any gentlemanly feeling at all; and a confused resolve that henceforth they *should* be, took shape in his mind. He would have liked to hint something of this kind to Nancie, but thought that perhaps it might look undignified. So he merely slapped her good-naturedly on the shoulder, pulled her hair, and said,

"Cheer up—old girl. We'll all show Dick what's in us when he comes back. And Kitty's going to ask us all to stay with her after a bit, you know. She promised she would." And so saying he lounged out of the room, and was soon, with his brothers' assistance, engaged in the construction of an enormous snow-man, which occupation continued until dark.

For a fortnight after that there was no letter from Dr. Graham, and Aunt Prue began to feel very anxious. Agatha was now in Canterbury, staying with Mrs. Endicott and her daughter. She was more convinced than ever by this time that her *métier* was to be a foreign missionary. Uncle John, however, pooh-poohed the idea; and indeed, it was with great difficulty that his consent had been obtained to her visiting the Endicotts at all, his opinion of the whole

family being that they were a "canting, narrow-minded lot."

Kitty wrote delightful letters, which alternately glorified her husband and her beautiful new home. She repeated her promise again and again that the family should visit her soon, and often; and in this invitation Charteris—magnanimous and forgiving young man! cordially concurred.

Meanwhile Nancie secretly fretted for news of Dick, and was just becoming drearily and miserably sure that he was dead, when one cold snowy February morning Aunt Prue had a letter—*not* from Dr. Graham, but from Dick himself! And oh! incredible joy!—in it was enclosed one for Nancie. The child's hands actually trembled with excitement as she opened it. It was not a very long letter, but as she read it Nancie felt as though Dick himself were speaking to her. He was much better, both letters said—better than he had ever hoped to be; he had suffered comparatively little pain of late, and seemed in fairly good spirits. But he said nothing about coming home.

Nancie kept the letter in the bosom of her frock for weeks, and read it over and over again, until the edges were almost worn away. She answered it, too—pouring out her whole heart, telling him all her perplexities and naughtinesses, her resolutions and failures—and above all how she loved him and missed him. Dick answered this

letter very soon; she in turn replied at once, and thus a regular correspondence was established between them.

And as the months went on, Nancie's good resolutions began to bear fruit; she hardly ever had wild fits of passion now (though the old enemy conquered her sometimes); she toiled patiently—after school hours, of course—to help Aunt Prue, and to be to the boys "like Kitty." The boys, to be sure (being boys), did not give her the satisfaction of knowing that she was really getting into Kitty's sunny, helpful ways; but they got into the habit of going to her, young as she was, in many little boyish scrapes and troubles; they tyrannized lovingly over her as they used to do over Kitty; and Ted made her heart sing for days by giving her a bear-like hug one night—in unwonted and unexpected recognition of some carefully-performed service—and declaring,

"You're getting a regular brick, Nancie! You're not like the same girl!"

And Aunt Prue said to her more than once,

"Why, Nancie, child, you are getting to be a wonderful help in the house. I'm sure I don't know what I should do without you."

These rare words of praise had a wonderfully stimulating effect upon Nancie, who grew more helpful and womanly every day. And indeed, I don't know what Aunt Prue *would* have done without her, for Agatha was

more taken up with parish work than ever, and had no time to attend to home duties. Rumour said, too, that the latter was on the point of becoming engaged to Mr. Endicott. And rumour, for once, was right; for such indeed was the case, as will be seen.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"AFTER MANY DAYS."

" Her eyes were resting on his face,
As shyly glad, by stealth to glean
Impressions of his manly grace
And guarded mien ;
The mouth with steady sweetness set,
And eyes conveying unaware
The distant hint of some regret
That harboured there."

Jean Ingelow.

So the time went on. Agatha became engaged to Mr. Endicott six months after Kitty's marriage, and—Uncle John's consent being with difficulty obtained—they were married in the autumn, and sailed for some unpronounceable place in China, accompanied by Miss Endicott. Shortly afterwards the boys paid their promised visit to Kitty and Charteris—not in their London home—but at Charteris's cosy little estate in Hampshire; and really the youthful visitors (whose coming, I am bound to say, Kitty had anticipated with mingled joy and fear) behaved—for them—uncommonly well. Nancie and Blinks had already spent a month with Kitty in the early summer.

Nancie was still as sensitive as of old regarding her personal appearance ; and was filled with incredulous joy by accidentally overhearing Charteris say one day to Kitty that " Nancie was becoming a rather fetching-looking little woman," and that " he shouldn't be surprised if she developed into a beauty one of these days."

When Roy was seventeen, Uncle John offered him a place as clerk in his factory, with the prospect of partnership by and bye, if he gave satisfaction.

Roy wrote to Dick regarding this proposal, and Dick strongly advised him to accept it—which he did, for Dick's word was law. Ted had given up his idea of becoming a cavalry officer, but not of entering the army ; and through Dick's intervention Uncle John was talked over and Ted was sent to Eton, with the prospect of a commission in a line regiment. Joe remained at St Ann's, and was made happy by being allowed to have violin-lessons three nights a week.

One December night, nearly two years after Kitty's marriage, the family—all that remained of them—were collected in the schoolroom. Aunt Prue, a little older-looking, a little greyer, than when first we saw her, was seated close to the fire, knitting, as usual. Nancie was helping Blinks and Baby May with their lessons. Joe, in a distant corner, was playing softly on his violin. On Aunt Prue's lap lay a letter ; and though it was from Dick, the post-mark was no longer a foreign one. The

letter had come this morning, and was dated from Trevanion Grange, Lancashire, which was Dick's home. He was now, the letter said, almost his old self again, though not quite out of the doctor's hands. He was no longer a prisoner on his sofa, but, with the aid of a walking-stick, could even get about a little, and hoped to make still further progress by and bye. His principal reason for writing was to invite them all to spend Christmas with him at Trevanion Grange; and Aunt Prue had decided that they ought to go. Kitty and Charteris were going too, Dick said, and they were to be accompanied by a wonderful baby—which had arrived six months ago, and thus promoted the gratified young Ruthvens to the proud positions of uncles and aunts. Uncle John and Roy were to come from Manchester, and Ted was expected home for the holidays next week.

Nancie was now rather more than fifteen, and grown quite tall. Her hair had grown long enough to plait into a long, thick, glossy tail behind ; her skin was still pale, though clear, and her eyes were now, as always, the chief attraction of her face. Nevertheless, Nancie gave promise of becoming a very lovely woman. Blinks still had the habit of winking which had earned her her nickname, and was just the same little sunshiny dumpling she had always been. Baby May—still called Baby May—was a slim merry-faced mite of nearly seven, as

lovable and quaint as ever. Joe had grown very tall, and was the same delicate-looking, mischievous scamp as in the old days.

"Now!" said Baby May with much satisfaction, as she put away her books, "no more lessons till next year!"

"Oh, isn't it jolly!" exclaimed Blinks, winking very fast. "I feel certain this is going to be an awfully happy Christmas. And then to think of seeing dear old Dick again so soon."

"I remember Dick quite well," announced Baby May importantly.

"Now, Baby May, you don't, you know!" put in Joe. "You were just a tiny girl when he went away."

"Yes, I do," said his little sister, almost weeping. "I do quite well."

"Don't tease her, Joe," remonstrated Nancie. "Of course you remember him, Baby May dear; and he remembers you too."

"I think, Nancie," said Aunt Prue, folding up Dick's letter, and putting it into her pocket, "I think we might fix to go on Thursday next."

"Or perhaps Friday, auntie," suggested Nancie. "You see Ted comes home on Tuesday, and his things always want looking over."

So Friday was decided upon; and on that day—which was looked forward to with intense pleasure by

the whole family—there was a grand gathering of the clans previous to the departure for Dick's home.

Could it be Dick who stood—yes actually *stood*—in the hall at Trevanion Grange to welcome the party from Ruthven Court? How tall he was!—how well he looked!—how different to the Dick they had known! But when he smiled—ah yes! it was Dick's smile. He was leaning on a heavy silver-headed walking-stick, and walked slowly and with difficulty; but otherwise he had “dropped” the invalid altogether.

“My dear boy—how well, how *different* you look!” exclaimed Aunt Prue, as she stood on tiptoe to kiss him. “I can hardly believe it *is* you!”

As for Kitty, she simply threw her arms round his neck and hugged him; and her husband actually looked on in calm approval.

“This is indeed a delightful surprise, Trevanion,” said Charteris, shaking his cousin-in-law's hand heartily, and without a trace of his usual languid voice and manner.

“My dear Charteris,” returned Dick a trifle unsteadily, “I owe an inestimable debt of gratitude to you. But for you I should never have heard of Graham, and—”

But here his other hand was seized by Uncle John.

“Dick, my dear fellow, you look first-rate!” he broke in jovially. “Why we shall have you riding to hounds

"Were they, Dick? I am so glad. I don't know what I should have done without yours. They helped me—oh, I can't tell you how much. If it hadn't been for you—both before you went away and after—I don't know what I should have grown into by this time." And Nancie sighed a little.

Dick smiled.

"Do you suppose anything I may have said would have been of any use, my little one, if you had not bravely made up your mind to conquer your faults yourself, as I know you did do? Do you think I don't know what a hard struggle it was for you, dear? And have you any idea how much your tear-stained, blotted, and yet to me infinitely precious letters told me?—you poor lonely little Nancie!" And Dick's moustache brushed her forehead again.

"Oh Dick!" she said with passionate earnestness, "I wish—oh, how I *wish* there was anything I might do for *you*!"

Dick tightened his arm round her for a second; then he let her go, and stood up.

"Some day"—he said with a strange sweetness in look and voice—"some day, Nancie, I may ask you to do something for me."

She sprang to her feet, and put both her hands impulsively into his.

"Ah, ask me now!" she answered eagerly, raising her

dark eyes to his steady brave grey ones as she spoke.
"Ask me now, Dick. I will do it—*whatever* it is."

"Not now, my Nancie. But some day," and his hands tightened their clasp on hers—"some day I shall claim your promise." Then he added somewhat abruptly, "Come—let us go back to the others."

* * * * *

That was a delightful Christmas-time. Dick gave them all *carte blanche* to do as they liked; and to do them all justice, they did not abuse their liberty. Even Ted and Joe behaved like civilized beings at table, played no practical jokes upon anybody, and in a hundred other particulars showed a wonderful improvement. Old Rawlings, the butler, informed the equally ancient housekeeper, Mrs. Landel, that "he had seldom seen a finer family, and that Master Ted reminded him strongly of what Mr. Dick used to be at his age—while as for the young ladies, they were pictures to behold."

As for Kitty's baby, its behaviour was simply beyond all praise. It had its mother's sunny disposition, and its father's imperturbable temperament. It never cried—at least, if it did, nobody ever heard it—and all its relatives declared that it was the best and finest-looking baby ever born. It was a boy, by the way, and its name was Guy Richard L'Estrange Charteris—a very large

name, as his Aunt May sententiously observed, for such a very small baby.

Charteris and Kitty were a delightfully well-matched couple, still passionately in love with each other, as all well-matched couples ought to be. The boys had been rather curious to see Kitty in the imposing character of a "Mammina;" but to their inexhaustible satisfaction, she was just the same old Kitty, and as mischievous and prank-loving as ever. Indeed, on the very day after her arrival at the Grange, her husband discovered her perched up among the leafless branches of an immense apple-tree, in a valiant attempt to rescue her son's hat, which naughty Joe had flung skyward a quarter of an hour ago. She had secured the hat, but could not descend without injuring baby's headgear, and her laughing brothers refused to assist her.

"Kitty, my darling, how could you?" whispered her husband with loving reproach, as—she having precipitated herself into his arms—he set her gently on *terra firma* again.

"Oh, Jerry, it was such fun!" she answered gleefully.
"I haven't climbed a tree since—since I was married!"

"Well, I'd rather you didn't do it again," said her lord and master severely.

Upon which Kitty made a delicious little face, and ran into the house.

It was many a long day since the old Grange had

had such a merry crew within its walls. There was a Christmas tree, of course; and Dick had provided the most extravagant and delightful presents for everybody. Aunt Prue gently chid him for this loving extravagance; but he only laughed mischievously, and kissed her.

"Don't scold me, Aunt Prue," he said, looking at her with quizzical grey eyes. "You don't know how like a boy I feel this Christmas, and—"

"But Dick," she interrupted him in an expostulating tone—"this beautiful ring, for instance. You know, my dear boy, a much simpler one would have pleased me quite as well—"

"Now, Aunt Prue—*quite* as well?"

"Well, I must confess I have always had a wish for a diamond ring," she admitted, regarding the glittering circlet with loving eyes.

"Of course you had," said her nephew, lifting the wrinkled but still pretty old hand to his lips. "And now you have got one; so be a good little auntie, and say you are sure you wouldn't have liked any other half so well."

"Well, my dear, perhaps I shouldn't," said Aunt Prue with a contented little sigh.

I am not going to describe in detail all the Christmas festivities. If you all think of the jolliest Christmas you ever spent anywhere, you may have a faint idea of what

this particular Christmas was like. Baby May confided to Dick that his house was the very nicest house she ever saw, and that she should like to come and live with him. The boys announced their intention of visiting Dick every Christmas ; and Dick said he hoped they would.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN WHICH DICK CLAIMS A PROMISE.

"The man who thoroughly loves God and his neighbour, is the only man who will love a woman ideally, who can love her with the love God thought of between them when He made them male and female. The man, I repeat, who loves God with his very life, and his neighbour as Christ loves him, is the man alone who is capable of grand, perfect, glorious love to woman."

George Macdonald.

NEARLY three years had passed, and it was again winter. The short November day had died long ago, and the firelight was shining fitfully on the walls of the library at Ruthven Court. A tall girl in deep mourning was standing on the hearthrug, gazing sadly into the glowing heart of the fire. It was Nancie—Nancie quite grown-up, as she had so often longed to be. A strange sad silence hung over the dear old Court, and a heavy shadow. It was the shadow of death. For Aunt Prue—dear, gentle, loving Aunt Prue—was dead. She had been very weak and delicate during the last two years, and a severe chill caught one raw wet day some weeks ago brought on an acute attack of inflammation. A few

days later, with a weary smile on her patient lips, and her hand clasping Nancie's, she died. Nancie missed her sorely, for they had been *friends*, as well as aunt and niece, during the last few years; and as the boys left the home nest to go out into the world, Nancie and Aunt Prue had been drawn closer still.

Roy was still in Manchester, steadily advancing in Uncle John's favour; Ted was at Sandhurst, and Joe at Harrow; and of all the merry light-hearted band whose feet and voices had sounded joyously through Ruthven Court, only Nancie, Blinks, and Baby May remained. Uncle John had been at the Court since the funeral; to-morrow he was to return to Manchester, taking the three girls with him. The dear old house was to be shut up for the remainder of the winter; and in the spring it was to be let. Nancie and Blinks were to make their home with Uncle John in Manchester, and Baby May was to live with Kitty and Charteris.

Nancie was feeling very sad, and depressed, and lonely to-night. Uncle John had gone up to town to see someone about the letting of the Court, and could not return until the 8.15 train. Blinks and Baby May were spending the evening with Miss Scrope, who was now a hopeless invalid and confined constantly to bed. So Nancie was quite alone.

She had been busy packing for the last two or three

days, and felt deadly tired ; and yet she could not rest quietly, though everything was done now, even to the cording up of all the boxes, and the addressing of all the luggage-labels. She was restless and anxious too ; for the evening post had come in, and there was no letter from Dick, who had been travelling abroad, by his doctor's orders, almost ever since that happy Christmas-time at Trevanion Grange. His last letter had been dated from Cairo, nearly five weeks ago. His health, he said, was almost what it had been before his accident, and he hoped to be in England before many months had passed. He had not, however, fixed any definite time for his return. Nancie had written to Cairo, telling him of Aunt Prue's illness and death. There had scarcely been time for an answer to that letter ; but it was very rarely Dick allowed more than a fortnight to elapse without writing, and Nancie, after the fashion of foolish loving little women, felt sure "something must have happened"—that undefined and nameless "something," which, I fancy, is ever present to one out of every fifty feminine minds, as lying in wait to pounce upon her nearest and dearest when out of her immediate line of vision. As a final catastrophe, Nancie now conjured up a melancholy picture of her cousin, having succumbed to some insidious eastern fever, being buried in a foreign land, and—But this last picture was too appalling, and Nancie began

to cry a little, and felt as if she really could not bear the suspense any longer. Even if Dick were not ill, or if nothing had "happened," she reflected drearily, it would certainly be months before he could be at home again. When he last wrote—the letter was to dear Aunt Prue! —he was on the point of starting on a slow journey up the Nile, stopping at ever so many unpronounceable places on the way. Besides, he talked of visiting Norway in the spring. Somehow Nancie had never wanted him so much as she did to-night. So many things troubled her and perplexed her, the old temptations rose up to assail her—to tempt her to the old discontent, and fretfulness, and sullen gloom. Life, just now, seemed to poor Nancie very grey, and cheerless, and impossible. She was not feeling well, either; for she had, of course, had more to do than usual during her aunt's illness and since the latter's death, and she was worn out physically—besides her ceaseless anxiety for her cousin, which naturally told upon her body as well as her mind. And to-night the weight of loneliness and depression was almost unbearable. She was nervous, too, for when the hall door-bell sounded through the silent house, she startled violently. Surely Uncle John could not have returned already?

After some minutes footsteps crossed the hall, and Nancie heard Ellen's voice say,
"In the library, sir."

The next moment the door opened, and someone came in.

"Is it you, Uncle John?" said Nancie, straining her eyes through the dim light, as the door closed again.

"No, Nancie," said a strangely dear and familiar voice, "it is not Uncle John. It is I."

There was an almost infinitesimal pause. Then, with a queer little sobbing cry, Nancie sprang forward and almost threw herself into the newcomer's arms.

"Oh, Dick!—oh dear, dear Dick, how glad I am!"

And poor, startled, lonely Nancie laid her head down on Dick's coat-sleeve, and cried as if her heart would break.

Dick was both surprised and touched.

"Why, Nancie!" he murmured unsteadily, "my poor little, lonely Nancie!" Then he just gathered her up in his arms, and held her there, silently for some time.

"Oh, Dick!" she sobbed hysterically at last—"don't think me foolish and childish! I can't help it!—I can't help it!"

"I know, dear," he whispered in the tender caressing voice she remembered so well. "Cry, my Nancie; it will do you good."

Then he stooped and kissed her.

"I could not get here in time," he went on in a low tone, after a pause; "it was impossible. You know that, don't you, dear?"

"Yes, yes," she answered between her sobs. "She spoke of you, Dick—at the very last—and sent you her—her love."

Dick did not answer; he only held her to him more closely.

There was a long, long silence, broken only by Nancie's sobs, which gradually grew fainter, and at last ceased altogether.

"Dick, you must be tired," she said remorsefully; "and I have kept you standing all this time. And you must want something to eat. I will ring and tell Ellen."

But he stopped her as she moved towards the bell.

"No, thanks, dear, I dined before I left town," he said, seating himself rather wearily on the sofa. "Come and sit down, Nancie; you look very tired too, I think, as far as I can see in the firelight."

He held out his hand as he spoke, and drew her down beside him.

"Shall I light the lamp, Dick?" she said. "I can hardly see you at all."

"No, dear, this light is better to talk by. Is it not?"

Nancie rose, and stirred the fire into a brighter blaze: then she sat down again. A curious dreamy sense of rest and peace had come over her. Life had grown rose-coloured now. Ah, Nancie—why?

They sat there in the firelight for a long time, and talked in the deliciously intermittent way in which people

do talk who love each other dearly, who have been long separated, and who now are together again. They talked of dear lost Aunt Prue, of Kitty and Charteris, of the boys, and of Agatha, who was now the mother of two little girls. They talked of Dick's travels too, and many other things. From time to time Nancie stole a look at her cousin's face, and found it but little changed. He was sunburnt, of course, and his moustache was a little darker and heavier; otherwise he was the same dear old Dick of three years ago. And as she listened to his voice, and met his smile, it seemed to Nancie that she had never felt so utterly happy.

Dick looked grave when he heard of the proposed letting of the Court.

"You know, Dick, I think it will be better," Nancie hastened to say—"at least in the meantime. By and bye, if Uncle John gives Roy a share in the business as he talks of doing, we may be able to live here again, but not for a long, long time!" And Nancie sighed.

"We are going to Manchester to-morrow," she went on after a pause. "And as you only arrived in England yesterday, I suppose you will want to be at home as soon as you can; but oh, Dick, I hope you will come to see us sometimes. The time has seemed so long—so very long—without you. And I believe—I sometimes feel as if I were just the same horrid old Nancie I used to be."

Dick was silent; he was pulling his moustache with strong, nervous fingers; his brows were slightly contracted, as though in difficult thought.

The room was very still; the snow fell softly through the darkness outside, and swept at intervals against the windows. The fire breathed and flickered monotonously and peacefully.

"Nancie," said Dick suddenly—"look at me."

Instantly and obediently she raised her eyes to his. Dick had beautiful eyes, dark, and grey, and long-lashed; and just now, as they looked down into Nancie's, they were full of an almost passionate tenderness.

"Nancie," he went on, taking one of her hands in his, and speaking very quietly—"do you remember a promise you once made me?"

"A promise!" she repeated, looking a little puzzled.

Dick smiled as the innocent brown eyes met his again.

"Nearly three years ago, Nancie, you said—do you remember?—that you wished there was anything you could do for me; and I said that some day I should perhaps ask you to do something for me. Have you forgotten?"

"No—no," she said eagerly, "I have always remembered, and wondered what it would be. Have you thought of something, Dick? Tell me what it is. There is nothing I would not do for you."

"Nancie, you dear little innocent child, did you never guess?"

The grey eyes met the brown ones again in a long, steady, silent gaze that seemed to go straight down into Nancie's heart. And it—poor startled little heart!—beat fast, awakened, and understood.

"Dick—oh, Dick!" she stammered, with quivering lips and burning cheeks.

"Can you give me what I want, Nancie?" he went on, bending his head to look into her averted face. "Can you give me your heart?—a woman's heart, Nancie, not a child's. I know that as a little child you loved me; I am sure you love me still. But, dear, it is another love I want—the best and sweetest love of all. Do you love me well enough to face life with me, Nancie—to be my own little wife?"

Nancie sat quite still, twisting her hands nervously, her face changing from red to white, and then to red again.

"Dear," Dick said gently, after a pause, "do not be afraid to tell me if—if you cannot change the old love into the new. I can still be your old Cousin Dick, you know, and—and we will forget about this." He spoke quietly; but his face was very pale, and his lips were trembling a little under his fair moustache.

"But, Dick!"—burst out Nancie all in a breath—"I—I don't *want* to forget about it! Oh, my *dear*, do you really love me like that? I am so bad-tempered, and plain, and—"

But she could not say any more just then, for Dick drew her gently into his arms and kissed her lips. And Nancie, blushing very much indeed, laid her hot little face on his shoulder, and nestled against his neck, just as she used to do when she was a little, forlorn, unhappy child long ago.

"Nancie," Dick said after a long silence, "are you quite sure you know your own mind? Fifteen years lie between us, child. Think well before you quite decide."

"I have thought," she whispered shyly—"and I know."

And then there was another long delicious silence, broken only by a murmured word or two.

All at once, the door opened, and Uncle John came in. The two occupants of the library, however, remained serenely unconscious of his presence.

The old gentleman advanced into the room. He took off his glasses and rubbed them; then he put them on again. No—there was no mistake about it! It was his niece Nancie, whom his astonished eyes beheld! Nancie—in the very act of being kissed by some one possessing a heavy fair moustache! Who the possessor of the moustache was, the justly indignant—not to say enraged Uncle John could not make out.

"*Nancie!*" he said, loudly and severely.

Nancie jumped. Her companion did not; he merely

turned his head slightly, and rose to his feet—still, however, keeping one arm round Nancie.

“How are you, Uncle John?” he said quietly, holding out his hand.

“Bless my soul!” exclaimed Uncle John, taking a step backwards in his surprise. “Dick, my dear boy—this is indeed an unexpected pleasure. We were speaking of you only last night. We expected a letter from you. You have heard, of course,” he went on huskily, “of course you would get Nancie’s letter—telling you of—of our loss—” He stopped suddenly, and stirred the fire with nervous violence.

“Yes,” said Dick, with a break in his deep grave voice, “I know. Dear, sweet Aunt Prue! We shall all miss her sadly.”

Uncle John cleared his throat loudly; then having rubbed his glasses for some time in silence, he said in a low voice,

“Yes, yes—we shall miss her. She was a good woman—a good lovable woman. Poor Prue—poor little Prue.”

There was a pause; then in a changed voice he began to question Dick about his travels.

“You look well, Dick,” he said, by and bye, when Nancie had lighted the lamp. “Pale a little, perhaps, but wonderfully changed for the better. Who would have thought it, now—six years ago! Well, well—and

are you going to give up wandering now—and settle down—eh ? ” he added.

Dick smiled slightly, and glanced at Nancie. She was industriously sweeping up the hearth, and replenishing the fire—feeling, in the bright lamp-light, very shy indeed.

“ Yes,” said Dick, pulling his moustache thoughtfully, “ I am going to give up wandering, and settle down. And with your consent, Uncle John—I am going to be married ! ”

“ Going to be married—eh ? Well—a very sensible thing too. As for my consent—you’ll hardly want *that*, I think ! ” And Uncle John laughed—the old genial laugh that no one had heard since Aunt Prue died.

“ I shall indeed,” said Dick gravely, drawing Nancie towards him with one hand ; “ for the little girl I want to marry is under your care.”

Something in both their faces betrayed their secret. Uncle John looked sharply from one to the other.

“ Bless my soul ! ” he ejaculated, “ you don’t mean to say you want to marry *Nancie* ! ”

“ Yes, that is what I mean,” replied Dick, very quietly and steadily. “ And,” glancing at the downcast little face at his side, “ I think Nancie is willing to marry me. Therefore we want your consent, Uncle John. Will you trust her to me ? ”

Uncle John walked up and down the room once or twice.

"Pooh, pooh!" he said at last. "Nancie, forsooth! She's a mere child. Besides, I don't approve of cousins marrying. And then your health, you know—"

"My health is thoroughly re-established," put in Dick quietly; "and Nancie is no longer a child—she is nearly nineteen. As to our being cousins, that, of course, is an undoubted and irrevocable fact which cannot be helped. But we love each other, and I know I could make her happy. Nevertheless, if you withhold your consent, we shall wait—until Nancie is of age." As Dick spoke, a certain light came into his eyes, and a certain expression round his mouth—a light and an expression which came there very rarely, and when they did come, denoted a determination that was fixed and unalterable.

"Until Nancie is of age!" repeated the old gentleman, stopping short in his promenade to face his nephew. "And how long, may I ask, did you think of waiting in the event of my giving my consent?"

"Until next summer," was the calmly audacious answer. "If you are willing, Nancie has promised to be my wife then."

"Nancie has promised, has she?" growled Uncle John, trying to frown. "A chit of a thing like that! I remember the day she was born! Married, forsooth. Next summer, too. Little minx!" Then he went on half to himself, "Ah well—why wait longer?—why wait at all? If you care for her, and she cares for you—.

why wear out your hearts in waiting? Take your happiness when it comes—when it comes. To some it never comes—till too late—too late!" Then turning to Dick, and speaking in a very shaky voice, "Dick, my boy, I don't approve of cousins marrying—you know it; but if you love each other—Well, well, be good to her, and tender with her, poor little woman—though I suppose I need hardly tell you that. God bless you both."

And having shaken Dick's hand warmly and spasmodically, the dear old man imprinted a hurried kiss on Nancie's forehead, and went quickly out of the room. He could not trust himself to further speech just then; for Uncle John, like most of us, had had his romance. He had been on the eve of marriage himself once, after a long, long engagement of nearly ten years, during which fortune refused to be wooed or won. And when at last, years ago, she smiled on John Dornton, the sweet little woman who was to have shared his prosperity went away from him—just two weeks before the day that should have made her his wife—went away to that far-off mysterious land where there is neither "marrying nor giving in marriage," and where riches and poverty are alike unknown. And in her faithful lover's heart no other had ever taken her place.

Hardly had the library door closed upon Uncle John than it opened again to admit Blinks and Baby May, the

former a tall, plump, but childlike young lady of about seventeen, the latter a merry little fairy nearly as old as Nancie was when this story began. They welcomed Dick with half-incredulous rapture ; and, when, later in the evening, he himself imparted to them the news of his engagement to Nancie, they at once proceeded to embrace him in a most affectionate and sisterly manner with the triumphant assurance that they had “ known how it would be, when they were all at the Grange three years ago ” (which was certainly rather a feat of imagination on Baby May’s part), and that they were “ just as glad as they could be.”

“ My little Nancie, my little wife ! ” murmured Dick some hours later, as he bid Nancie good-night in the firelit library, now deserted by all save themselves.

“ Dick’s wife ! ” thought Nancie with a happy little sigh. “ Shall I be that ? Can it be true ? —can it be true ? ”

“ Oh Dick,” she whispered, “ my dear, dear Dick—you will help me to be good—to be a good woman as well as a good wife—will you not ? ”

“ My darling,” answered Dick in his deep tender voice, “ my own little girl—we will help each other. God keep you, my Nancie—God keep us both, and help us both—through all the coming years.”

With the last words his lips met hers very gravely and tenderly, and that kiss held for Nancie a strange solemnity. It seemed to her that it bound her to her newly-found lover, that she was Dick's property now, that she had given herself to him irrevocably, and did not belong to herself any more.

And their two hearts beat through the dusky fire-light—the girl's tremulously, the man's passionately ; and over their souls floated sweet foreshadowings of the years to come, through which they were to walk hand in hand—sharing their joys, their cares, their sorrows —comforting and helping each other, comforting and helping those around them—lovers still, as well as husband and wife, until the last inevitable parting. And even that would be only “for a little while.” For would they not have “an eternity to spend together ? ”

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SPECIMEN PAGE

44

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"The lion, which is the king of all the animals wot ever lived, was so little that I shouldn't have noen it was him, only I have seen picters, and my mother said 'Look, Tom, now you can say as you've seen a lion.' Why he isn't quarter as big as a eliphent, and he hasn't got no trunk. I think the eliphent could master him if he liked ; but the big silly won't try, coz he's so kind, and doesn't want to be king. The lion is yeller, but not so yeller as in the picter book what the Board gev me. He looks at yer through the bars like as wot he was saying 'you

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